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## A Parallax View of Teacher Ontology: Reconceptualizing the Reflexive Method in the Abyss of Žižekian Negativity

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DePaul University  
College of Education

A Parallax View of Teacher Ontology:  
Reconceptualizing the Reflexive Method in the Abyss of Žižekian Negativity

A Dissertation in Education  
with a Concentration in Curriculum Studies

by

Brian R. Gilbert

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Submitted in Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education  
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We approve the dissertation of Brian R. Gilbert.

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## Abstract

The primary emphasis of this research is the exploration and development of a Žižekian lens of teacher reflection. This methodological exploration further considers how the Žižekian lens can function as a unique contribution to both teacher education and the philosophy of education through the exploration of particular pathways of teacher consciousness and misrecognitions of self-identity in relation to the discourse of education. Following Žižek, teacher reflection is an act of resistance to this discourse that begins with uncovering the failure of our own perception as the result of a misperception at the limits of being in/through the big Other thereby reifying our own existence. Using various reflexive pathways and intellectual trajectories, each of the chapters within this research examines my self-identity as a teacher in relation complex system of philosophical inquiry within the daily reality of my classroom. Each reflexive passage or point of reflexive analysis represents the transition from an epistemological void (un-knowing) to an ontological one (being)—or, more precisely, the reflexive passage from grappling with the inaccessible thing beyond the subject's reach to an understanding of my-self as subject itself, as the Thing incapable of being reduced that is the (Lacanian) Real of reality. This empty point of negativity is the negation of all determinacy and it is within this space devoid of all content that I am able to reflexively encounter my true identity as a teacher.

One way of grasping this position is through the process of endless self-critique or hysterical questioning that characterizes subjectivity as such. This subject position as the Žižekian Real is an ontological difference that ruptures both the individual teacher and society, particular and universal without lapsing into fantasies of completeness. Within this framework, teacher reflection serves as a means of traversing our misrecognitions of being and is the inverse of many common-sense approaches to reflection that aim to get rid of fantasies, false



consciousness, illusionary prejudices and misperceptions, which distort teachers' view of reality, and finally learning to accept reality the way it really is. By envisioning teacher reflection through the Žižekian lens we do not learn to suspend our phantasmagorical production—on the contrary, teachers must identify with the excess of her/his imagination ever more radically, in all of its inconsistency and failures. The ultimate wager of this formulation of teacher reflection is that it is not only possible, but necessary, to conceive of this zero-level of subjectivity, as an unconscious knowledge that awaits its moment to emerge, take shape and shatter the coordinates within which we make sense of today's educational discourse. This dormant teaching self lies in wait, waiting for the surplus of our unknown and repressed knowledge to be translated into a fearless vision of teaching and education yet to come. Our thought must throw itself beyond its familiar course if it is to legitimize its disengagement and unthink the reality from which we were ensnared. Teacher reflection as an act of subjective destitution involves the experience of losing one's self to finally disentangle the coordinates of our ontological being. Ultimately, this experience of destitution is the subjective position this research seeks to explore, broadly identified as Žižek's negative ontology.

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## Introduction: The Parallax View

For the past several years, I have started each school year by showing my students the “spoon scene” from Lana and Lily Wachowski’s dystopian classic *The Matrix*.<sup>1</sup> In the scene, Neo, the film’s protagonist, encounters a boy (“spoon boy”) bending a spoon with his mind when he visits the Oracle (a program with such insight into human psychology that she has clairvoyant abilities) for the first time. As Neo waits for the Oracle, the boy attempts to teach Neo about the nature of being as it relates to the self and its surrounding objects: "Do not try and bend the spoon. That's impossible. Instead only try to realize the Truth... There is no spoon... Then you'll see that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself." At the conclusion of the scene, I ask my students to write a brief reflection interpreting the boy’s message. Absent additional insight into the film or any context into to what (“exactly”—as my students so often ask of me) I am seeking as their teacher, my students (frequently) struggle to articulate a response. After allowing a few anguishing minutes of silence to pass (i.e. pedagogical wait time), I begin introducing an array of philosophical concepts. Rather than providing them a solid footing to engage the problem each concept is meant to disorient them further. While the concepts I have deployed have shifted throughout the years, a few constants have included: Lacan’s development of de Saussure’s signifier, Foucault’s reading of discourse, Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, and Žižek’s formulation of ideology—a Hegelo-Lacanian deviation from the traditional Marxist notion of the term. As the students’ struggles crescendo, I commend them for “getting it!” I inform them if they were to believe they understood the full complexity of what we were discussing, then I would be suspicious that they were not opening themselves up to the possibilities of what lies ahead on our journey together.

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<sup>1</sup> Lana Wachowski and Lily Wachowski, *The Matrix* (Hollywood: Warner Bros, 1999) DVD.

I analogize this journey to my students as Alice ‘tumbling down the rabbit hole’<sup>2</sup> in an attempt to ‘unthink’ the ways in which we have been taught (largely through the processes of schooling) to see the world. In much the same way, I view the process(es) of self-discovery that are documented in this dissertation as an *unthinking* of my subjective self as a teacher—each movement an attempt to unthink and problematize my own positionality. Broadly, this research is connected by two concepts developed by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek: *looking awry* and the *parallax view*. To be clear, these terms are not the interpretive lenses through which this research is conducted. Instead, like the sinewy tendons that bind our human flesh, acting as a mechanical lever of automation, these concepts allow us to imagine here how each chapter is bound together and structured as a unified being—although the complexities of each may seem like a philosophical system unto itself. For Žižek, the term *looking awry* is a sustained analysis of the sinthome—the piece of subject that is more than the subject her/himself. To look awry at oneself or, in this case, to look awry at teacher reflection involves an analysis of the self beyond our own fantasy constructions and misrecognitions of reality.<sup>3</sup>

The parallax view can be conceived of—in this context—as a/the next step in the reflexive process. The parallax is a way of viewing ‘that which is otherwise’ by accounting for the very multiplicity of appearances of the same underlying Real of reality. The parallax view, in this way, is an attempt to shift my perception of the core of my being which appears to always persist as the same. This piece of my being—which Žižek terms the “bone-in-the-throat”<sup>4</sup>—paradoxically embodies both the lack that is the subject and is that which forever prevents the subject from achieving its full ontological possibility. The parallax view, however, simultaneously pulverizes

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (New York: Random House, [1871] 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000).

this sameness into a multitude of appearances by introducing a radical non-coincidence of thought and being. This shift in view is a philosophical twist to standard philosophical readings of self as teacher—even those that might follow seemingly similar Marxist or Lacanian/psychoanalytic trajectories. At the level of pure abstraction, the parallax is an apparent displacement of an object when viewed from varying perspectives. When the self-as teacher/subject—is viewed from an inverted parallax perspective an irreducible asymmetry is generated between the two ontic planes—noumenal/phenomenal—thereby displacing the object of perception and providing new observational positions. The gap between these positions is the (Lacanian) Real of the subject insofar as our subjectivity is exposed as the gap itself lacking any substantial consistency within the ontological horizon. Thus, “the Real [as] parallax and... nonsubstantial”<sup>5</sup> can only be contextualized as the subjective self and emerges as a forced shift in perspectives from fantasmatic teacher to Real being. My-self as Real teacher subject thus emerges in the moments of betweenness—i.e. the gap itself.<sup>6</sup>

On a supplemental level, Žižek’s parallax theory highlights a larger philosophical thread taken up in this research; mainly, the importance of ontological research within educational theory. At its most fundamental level, this research seeks to uncover how shifts in the meditation between the subject and object are such that an epistemological shift in the subject’s point of view always-already reflects and ontological shift in the object itself. What this means is that the parallax view uncovers how the subject’s gaze is always-already inscribed into the perceived object itself as a blind spot.<sup>7</sup> This construction develops a theoretical constitution of reality that is dependent on the teacher-subject itself and reinscribes the teacher into her/his own ontological

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<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 26.

<sup>6</sup> Importantly, this reflexive twist is not the constitution of two perspectives (real and false) but an attempt to grasp the Real of subjectivity itself.

<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

image of reality. Importantly, as a statement of philosophical delineation, this position is not a direct materialist position (the direct assertion of my own inclusion in reality) as there is no assertion that the teacher-subject can grasp the whole of reality. Instead, following Žižek, the subject is material only through a “reflexive short circuit” where the self is redoubled or subjectively viewed from “outside and inside” inscribing itself in its own picture.<sup>8</sup> In this precise sense, the teacher as subject is able to reflexively grasp its own inclusion in material reality and is—simultaneously—a part of material reality that always eludes the subject because it contains missing pieces of the whole.

When considering the weight of this position, the notions of self as teacher-subject, reflection, and reflexivity are radically destabilized. By following this framing, I am forced to imagine the only true image of my teaching self as existing in the fleeting moments between two worlds. While this view only momentarily appears, it uncovers the piece of my-self that is the Real of my irreducible asymmetry. It is from this position that it becomes possible to see how the negative ontological position of lack opens a pathway to a universal positivization of being. Perhaps, more pragmatically, it is from this position of betweenness (or parallax) that I might become aware that my understandings of self-identity have always-already been constructed by that which eluded it and the other perspective which filled in the void that I could not see from the first perspective.

The glimmering potentiality I seek to enunciate within this maddening and paradoxical minefield is two-fold. First, by situating this research within the complexity (both the potentiality and fallibility) of this perspective, I highlight the possibility of Žižek’s philosophical dialectic—both as the paradox that sustains his method and the method through which his work functions as

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<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006)17.



a pedagogical contribution to teacher education. Unlike most philosophical examinations of the ontic domain in education, the Žižekian dialectic does not create a (social) ontology of humanism nor is it guided by a critical teleology of emancipation. Further, it avoids postmodern slippages without abandoning the construct of the subject or circumscribing the individual by paradoxical splitting the ontic domain—both as what is constitutive of the socio-Symbolic structure of being and the ontological lack that sustains it. In more particular terms, the teacher-subject that emerges in this reach is as a negative ontological being that is nothing but misrecognition or lack and it is this alienation that locates the kernel of (universal) truth<sup>9</sup> among all subjective beings.

Within such terms, the Žižekian dialectic, as negative ontology, provides an-other lens to view the daily realities of ourselves, schools, and classrooms. This runs counter to many of our present paradigms where we might say it is only because we teachers fail to see ourselves and each other in our true light (or at least we blind ourselves to these flaws) that we are able to work through our respective character flaws and arrive at a common understanding. However, by recognizing that there is no truth of meaning apart from alienation, teachers might identify with one another in the primordial experience of (non)-being—i.e. the (pure) negativity in which the subject loses or sacrifices her/his identity during the process of subjectivization. In the maintenance of this alienated subjectivity, the neoliberal discourse(s) of education (un)consciously inflects upon all teacher-subjects producing a substanceless subjectivity or an alienated subject that is “part of no part.” The teacher-subject, as such, is proletarian. But, in realizing that our precious fantasies of self, teaching, and resistance are shit, we teachers become

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<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

a collective swarm of resistance able to coalesce across time and space striking out of the darkness as a decisive political act that transforms Symbolic subjectivity.

Secondarily, Žižek's unorthodox use of dialectic engagement between self and other (teacher/student, author/reader, etc.) opens the space (if even momentarily) for the interpretation of gaps in understanding left open by interpretative threads splitting and spiraling in a multitude of directions. Sharpe and Boucher suggest Žižek's unsystematic approach to argumentation is an example of a rhetorical method termed parataxis. Parataxis, in this lens, is a "style that suppresses the logical and casual connections between clauses in a sentence, paragraph, chapter, or work."<sup>10</sup> Pedagogically, the aim of the parataxic movement is to leave the interlocutor to infer what is missing within the logical breaks and interruptions of thinking. Within Žižek's own argumentation there always remain an implicit space (or gap) that leaves the reader unfulfilled, left to infer what might be. This approach suggests that one of the primary critiques levied against Žižek—a lack of a directly articulated positionality or system of thought—is precisely the point of the analysis itself. The pedagogical possibility of this positionality aims to subvert the big Other (Master position) by rendering it a pointless desire for activity without an end. Ultimately, the pedagogical possibility of the Žižekian dialectic, refers to the creation of a constant perceptual tension when we (teacher/educators/intellectuals) have to look twice in order to see things as they really are—simultaneously spelling the end and their beginning.

## **CH 1 Introductory Framing**

Chapter one reflexively examines my own commitment to critical pedagogy and attempts to uncover why, so often, acts of resistance feel anything but emancipatory. Within the normality

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) 21.

of the everyday, this chapter examines why pedagogical acts often become deformed, manifesting as discontent and failure rather than true revolutionary politics. This state of betweenness is akin to Žižek's parallax gap, in that amid the two states of critical being—the ideology of resistance and the ontological prescriptive orator (or, more simplistically, my-self as critical educator but alienated teacher-subject)—there is no synthesis or meditation possible. The problem is that unlike the potentiality posited within the negative spaces of betweenness qua the parallax gap, the disjunction of my failure as a teacher is marked by a writhing discomfort of placelessness—the placelessness caused by the impossible fulfillment of my (“the”) emancipatory dream. Because of this, my descriptions and enactments of pedagogical acts and classroom engagements often unconsciously become little more than moral platitudes transformed into metaphors of struggle invoked to create an impression of an essential self (the Lacanian ideal-I). Such formulations create a ‘truth’ of experience through the frame of struggle whereby a singular right response would be problematic, and sympathy is garnered in support of the moral objectification of the student experience. My personal identity, in this sense, is connected to the story but any form of subject coherence is a fantasy rather than a form(ulation) of critical consciousness. As a response, chapter one develops a negative ontological reading of teacher reflection and a vision of radical pedagogy beyond the critical frame. This movement destabilizes my reflexive framework as a teacher-subject by uncovering my own perverse reading of critical praxis.

## **CH 2 Introductory Framing**

Chapter two is an unthinking about my foundational understanding of teaching and teacher reflection. Metapragmatically—broadly following Silverstein, both how the effects and

conditions of language use themselves to become objects of discourse and meaning comes from their temporal contiguity with their referent—<sup>11</sup> this chapter is a methodological reflection on teacher reflection itself whereby each reflexive movement of the subject position is meant to produce complications and inversions of my own subjective perception. Such inversions are meant to generate an irreducible asymmetry between ontic planes (noumenal/phenomenal), displace objects of perception, and provide new observational positions<sup>12</sup>—i.e. the parallax view. As a way forward through the thicket, this chapter both outlines the existing literature on teacher reflection/reflexivity and examines how the possibilities of problematizing my own perception of self as a teacher-subject might open new pathways for understanding education—within the shifting temporal spaces of the daily reality of my classroom. Here again we encounter the underlying importance of examining the ontic domain in that the method itself uncovers how epistemological shifts in the subject’s point of view always-already reflect the ontological through shifts in the subject-object itself.

By drawing on Žižek’s philosophical corpus, I methodologically tarry with the outer limits of my subjective frame and radically dismantle my understanding through progressively shifting and often deteriorating stages of perception. Theoretically, this reflexive movement allows me to disrupt the textual stability of teacher reflection/reflexivity by constraining my positioning as a teacher–subject to a space beyond itself. While I cannot, as Lacan noted, “literally” step outside of myself,<sup>13</sup> the methodological intent of this research is to reflexively force myself into positions that are radically disjunctive. Philosophically, this disjunction is akin to the parallax view as the forced shifts in perspective from the subject of the addressee to the

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Silverstein, "Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description," in *Meaning in Anthropology*, ed. Keith Basso and Henry A. Selby (Albuquerque: UNM Press, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: Norton, 2006)

addresser creates the short-circuit that allows the subject to momentarily grasp its own lack—i.e. the position of the Real of reality in its alterity of finitude.<sup>14</sup>

### CH 3 Introductory Framing

Chapter three functions as a methodological exploration of the theoretical frameworks outlined in chapters one and two. In this chapter, I consider in what ways I as a teacher-subject perceive reality by juxtaposing the subjective ontological plane qua virtual reality; or, more specifically, various (re)presentations of technological education and Žižek's negative ontology. Using the film, *The Matrix* as an interpretive lens and pop cultural sign post, I work to develop a Žižekian reading of the Real—the abyssal vortex which ruins every consistent structure—as a crisis of teacher ontology. Metaphorically, the underlying question that threads this chapter is whether what I (as teacher-subject) perceive as reality is *the Matrix*—in that it prevents the individual from seeing reality as it effectively is? The trap to be avoided in education—just as in our interpretation of the *The Matrix*—is that the Real we should be seeking is not a “true reality” found by contrasting the virtual domain against material reality. Instead, understanding is found beneath the fallacy that some larger structure impedes our access to the Real reality such that beneath the opaque space of the virtual is the “desert of the Real.”

Here again, the parallax view is present in how the subject and object are ‘mediated’ and the splits in consciousness and understanding between physical and digital modes of reality. Against the notion that technology prevents our access to the Real of reality, I argue that the problem of education is that teachers always-already misperceive the constitutive consistency of the experience structuring reality. Thus, it is the teacher's subjective fantasy that s/he

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<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

misperceives as reality generating a false understanding of the Real that is bearable. Given this position, each methodological movement begins from the lack within every teacher-subject and proceeds toward a radical pedagogy (beyond traditional and critical frames) by pathologically restructuring the failures of the subjective frame—highlighting how shifts in teacher ontology can radically alter the reality of what we call education.

#### CH 4 Introductory Framing

Chapter four takes up the breadth of the preceding chapters by examining how far our reflexive understanding has been extended and asking the Leninist question, *what is to be done?*<sup>15</sup> What is to be done with this newly uncovered perspective of self as a teacher? As a concluding oeuvre I situate my subjective self in relation to Stanley Kubrick's<sup>16</sup> adaptation of the dystopian novella *A Clockwork Orange*<sup>17</sup>—a cinematic cacophony of “ultraviolence” that critically examines the perverse hypocrisy of modern society. Using Kubrick's reading of the narrative as a conceptual framework, this penultimate chapter formulates a series of unlikely and disquieting parallels between Alex- the story's primary antagonist- and my own enunciations of being both as a teacher and within the larger structures of our modern socio-Symbolic culture.

As I have outlined this project at various academic conferences and shared my initial findings with colleagues, my use of the film has been received with skepticism by some within the field, viewed as little more than a theoretical sideshow used to grab an audiences' attention, when viewed from an-other (i.e. parallax) perspective, this criticism highlights the pedagogical possibility of the Žižekian example. Examples can, of course, be suspicious when used as props

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<sup>15</sup> V. I. Lenin, *What is to be Done?*, trans. Patricia Utechin (Oxford: Clarendon, [1902] 1963)

<sup>16</sup> *A Clockwork Orange*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 1971)

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange: The Restored Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., [1962] 2012)

in our line of reason. But Žižek's particular use of the example as dialectical method demonstrates how it can enable the audience to make sense of an argument that might otherwise lack clarity or proper insight. In his own parlance Žižek notes,

I resort to these examples above all in order to avoid pseudo- Lacanian jargon, and to achieve the greatest possible clarity not only for my readers but also for myself— the idiot for whom I endeavor to formulate a theoretical point as clearly as possible is ultimately myself.<sup>18</sup>

The importance of Kubrick's reading of Burgess' novella is uncovered both in his alterations to the narrative itself and the possibilities that only exist in his re-presentations through the cinematic lens. To fracture the bounds of this analysis further, Kubrick's reading of violence is read again along-side Žižek's theory of violence—constructing the chapter's formulaic structure *Kubrick avec Žižek*.

In retrospect, I have come to view this chapter as something akin to Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*. The installation occupies a closed-off room in the main Duchamp gallery at Philadelphia Museum of Art (see Figure 1). The room itself is a dead end, it can't be entered. The entrance blocked by a pair of locked antique wooden doors, impenetrable except for two small peepholes bore into their center.

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<sup>18</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005) 175.



Figure 1: Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés*, 1946-66, Exterior View. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Viewing the installation requires the viewer to peer into the peepholes—an act only one person can do at a time—making the viewing experience intensely self-conscious. Simultaneously, there are always other spectators waiting, creating a constant sense of being gazed up as if you are momentarily subsumed as an object within the tableau. Inside, just beyond the door, you see shattered brick and, in the distance, a painted autumn landscape (see Figure 2). In the foreground, just beyond the fallen wall, the nude body of a woman is sprawled on a nest of dried branches. With her face obscured by blonde hair and her legs spread, one cannot help but feel that her genitals are the intended focal point. Immediately to the right, her left arm is raised at the elbow and in her hand, she holds a small, illuminated electric lamp.





Figure 2: Marcel Duchamp, *Étant donnés*, 1946-66, Interior view. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

There is a beauty and violence in Duchamp's work that parallels the reading of Žižek that emerges through Kubrick. Simultaneously, the odd alterity of being that exists when attempting to view ourselves from the outside. *Étant donnés* frames the troubled states of reflexivity we encounter throughout this chapter. Throughout the processes of reflexive exploration and problematization of the reflective method, chapter four highlights an explicit implementation of, or perhaps examination of, Žižek's paratactic method. As such, this chapter is both intensely theoretical and laden with pop cultural references to help unpack dense philosophical concepts. The main point of differentiation from earlier chapters—and from most mainstream education literature—is that this chapter is intentionally lacking in overt educative analysis. To reiterate the proceeding, the intent here is not definitional laziness but to leave the reader space to infer what is missing so that you might interpret and apply it to your own contexts. This does not mean, however, the chapter is void of analysis. The antagonistic structure of the film is re-presented through multiple readings of the structures of school(ing) and my-self as teacher-subject whereby an array of perverse hypocrisies are unveiled exposing an inherently antagonistic and violent

edifice. By problematizing the assumptive positionality and representation of the film's key figure— I situate myself, as a veteran teacher and administrator in a large U.S. city, aside Alex, a controversial antihero and authoritative assailant within Kubrick's exegetical minefield. The notion of a teacher, as such, functions as a Lacanian *object* filling in the void that gentrifies the terrifying Thing constitutive of Symbolic reality itself. Simultaneously, my own understandings of being (as teacher, subject, etc.) are confronted with various iterations of Symbolic and objective violence; a violence always-already unconsciously dismissed because it functions as an invisible force inherent to the allegedly non-violent or "normal" state of things.<sup>19</sup> However, by remaining alongside Alex, I am forced to constantly question the assumptive normality of this state of being.

The intentionality of this final journey is to confront myself with the role that fantasy plays in my own subjective understanding—particularly, as it relates to various iterations of the notion of violence itself. It becomes increasingly clear to me (as the chapter progresses) that fantasies are not easily located within everyday experiences but within the trauma of disjunctive experiences that become momentarily present. Picking up on what was uncovered in the preceding three chapters, this final analysis highlights again and again that the universal (Real) truth of being is alienation itself. The price for our access to what we experience as reality is that somethings must remain unthought—this is the function of fantasy.

## **CH 5 Introductory Framing**

As this collective project draws to an end, I highlight the collective toll of this research, uncovering the full depth of my fantasies and the role they play in making the daily reality of my

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<sup>19</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008)

circumstances tolerable through the creation of multiple layers of (mis)perception. The notion of violence is invoked as a methodological deathblow to my subjective self by creating a rapturous missing link to open the radical potentiality of teacher reflection by placing the subjective self under the extreme distress of the method itself.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, I wonder—even under the extreme distress of this method—how effectively teachers can change the circumstances of their reality? How does teacher reflection already function as a system that produces, and at the same time is constituted by, parallax views—multiple, incongruent, and self-contradictory—that suspend our sense of reality? As a teacher-/researcher attempting to relinquish my grip (on the constructs of education, reality, etc.), even unconsciously, how does this process involve a fear of loss and betrayal that saturates my subjective experience? Is this sensation amplified on the left, as we view our-selves as protecting a vision (version of the truth) that is “radical” in its purity? Does the constantly shifting terrain of the educational complex cause a heightened sense of anxiety over the apparent loss of autonomy spiraling outward in something akin to what we might call agency panic? As a teacher-researcher, I often find myself transforming similar feelings into a nervous energy that constantly questions what lies beneath all things. I find myself engaging in fits of interpretive paranoia, always reading between the lines trying to see through the bullshit of everyday reality. After emerging from these interpretive fits, I find myself in a downward spiral, facing the possibility/probability that my own failures within the classrooms are just as egregious as the systematic failures I try to resist. After three years of research I now face the prospect that I am not ostensibly any different as a teacher than I was in the beginning.

Tarrying with the negative is, at its most basic, a process expressed in the withering of idealism. The idealism that is the belief in the dream of teaching and the possibilities of what might be over the course of my career. More than mere pragmatism, the decay of this idealist position might serve as a fulcrum for radical change or represent the loss of my identity (in)to the hegemonic abyss of the structures of education. To this end, Hegel's argument is that the "subject does not survive the ordeal of negativity: he effectively loses his very essence and passes over into his Other." The Other in this sense represents the hegemonic discourse of the educational apparatus, and my essence is the dream I cling to—that a radical teacher can change the world one child at a time. Over time, however, the system draws each of us into closer proximity with one another until the Other subsumes the essence. Thus, as a teacher-subject I must arrive at the violent realization that the system is beyond my resistance. But where does this leave me/us? According to Agamben, within our present historical moment, the strength of true philosophical thought requires the courage of hopelessness.<sup>20</sup> Žižek goes on further to say:

The true courage is not to imagine an alternative, but to accept the consequences of the fact that there is no clearly discernible alternative: the dream of an alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice, functioning as a fetish that prevents us from thinking through to the end the deadlock of our predicament. In short, the true courage is to admit that the light at the end of the tunnel is probably the headlight of another train approaching us from the opposite direction.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps then, as I stare into the abyss, do the feelings of despair and abject hopelessness that torment me mean this methodological endeavor helped me arrive precisely where I need to be!?

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<sup>20</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "Thought is the Courage of Hopelessness," *Verso*. March 01, 2017, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1612-thought-is-the-courage-of-hopelessness-an-interview-with-philosopher-giorgio-agamben>

<sup>21</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness: A Year of Acting Dangerously* (Penguin, 2017).

## CH 1- My Precious Fantasy is Shit: A Negative Ontological Reading of Critical Pedagogy

### The Trash Can of Education

In the 1980's film *They Live*,<sup>1</sup> a transient worker in Los Angeles, John Nada, discovers an unusual box of sunglasses that function somewhat like a direct critique of ideology. When the glasses are worn, they allow him to see the “real” messages beneath advertisements, public messaging, and so on. As the film reaches its climax, Nada attempts to get his friend, Frank, to wear the glasses but faces an unexpectedly brutal resistance from Frank. In response, Nada offers an ultimatum: “I’ll give you a choice, either put on these glasses or start eating that trash can.” In this moment, the oft-forgotten Hollywood cult classic unveils two unconscious and fantasmatic distortions by paralleling the function of the critical pedagogical frame. First, as philosopher Slavoj Žižek notes, we are already “eating from the trash can all the time ... but the material force of ideology makes us not see what we are effectively eating.” As a consequence, it is not a false understanding of reality that enslaves us. Rather, the tragedy of our condition is that at the moment we think we escape ideology into our dreams (and begin to think we exist outside ideology), we are actually most within it.<sup>2</sup>

If we take a step backward and examine this example further, we find that in our enlightened or perhaps cynical times it might be said that we are all always-already wearing the glasses. Thus, the fight between Nada and Frank would never occur. Instead—like Tyler Durden (Edward Norton) in *Fight Club*<sup>3</sup> (—after putting on the glasses, Nada would only see his own monstrous face and the blind automation as the truth of the cynical (i.e. post-ideological position). In such a context, the function of the glasses provides an inversion of the standard

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<sup>1</sup> *They Live*, directed by John Carpenter (Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1988), DVD.

<sup>2</sup> *Perverts Guide to Ideology*, directed by Sophie Fiennes and Slavoj Žižek (London: Zeitgeist Films, 2012), DVD.

<sup>3</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 2006)

critical pedagogical critique. From a critical pedagogical perspective, the wearing of glasses often functions as an analogy for the distortion of the subject's view;<sup>4</sup> thus, by taking them off (i.e. the emancipatory struggle), the subject can finally see things the way they really are. This analysis, of course, follows a standard Marxist reading of *false consciousness*, whereby ideology is an epistemological problem (a problem of knowledge). As an example of such a reading, McLaren notes, "underneath their explicit and official purposes, curricular and pedagogical processes are organized in the interest of elite groups, and [...] they function to preserve social structure and hegemony."<sup>5</sup> But the film's inversion of the ideologic critique highlights the failure of the epistemological claim and the ultimate illusion of critical resistance: ideology is not simply imposed on the subject. Instead, we enjoy our ideology! This is why, according to Žižek, Frank resists John's demands to put on the glasses.<sup>6</sup> The subjective Real that insists within the ideological critique is precisely the inverse of the critical pedagogical perspective—to put on the glasses exposes the truth of the lie, shattering the illusion of emancipatory resistance. The Real of our reality, as such, is that we must be forced to be free, forced to endure the extreme violence of liberation, and the hurt of our own freedom.<sup>7</sup>

Over the years, I have come to imagine myself in a similar kind of brutal confrontation with both the educational apparatus I seek to resist *and* the ideological disposition of my resistance. As a way of contextualizing the, at times, paradoxical nature of these positions, I situate myself as a narrative referent within the confines and contexts of my classroom. During my thirteen years as a teacher and administrator in urban U.S. high schools, I have self-identified

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<sup>4</sup> Joe Kincheloe, *Teachers as Researchers: Qualitative Inquiry as a Path to Empowerment*, classic ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 84.

<sup>5</sup> Noah De Lissovov. "Education and Violation: Conceptualizing Power, Domination and Agency in the Hidden Curriculum," *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 15 (2012), 469.

<sup>6</sup> *Perverts Guide to Ideology*, directed by Sophie Fineness and Slavoj Žižek (London: Zeitgeist Films, 2012), DVD.

<sup>7</sup> *Perverts Guide to Ideology*, directed by Sophie Fineness and Slavoj Žižek (London: Zeitgeist Films, 2012), DVD.

as a critical educator. From the vantage of the Žižekian lens, this analysis seeks to articulate how my daily reality is intimately tainted by particular ideologies and beliefs that implicate what I see, how I see, and therefore how I interpret various educational settings. While what has always appeared to be at stake, within the critical pedagogical frame, is a kind of ignorance of the reality I live in, instead, viewed through a Žižekian prism, teachers are acutely aware of their distorted perception of reality. Because of this, critical pedagogy can no longer be interpreted through Marx's classic reading of ideology—"they do not know it, but they are doing it."<sup>8</sup> Instead, following Žižek's reading of Sloterdijk,<sup>9</sup> the teacher position is situated as that of the cynical subject: "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it."<sup>10</sup>

To be clear, this reflexive movement does not mean we are living in a post-ideological world; rather, it highlights the failure of teachers' awareness of the reflexive frame, particularly as it relates to questions of epistemology versus ontology within educational research. Questions of ontological understanding are, of course, a part of the daily fabric of all teachers' reality—in both the way teachers see themselves as educators and in the development of their professional persona. While understanding our sense of self as teachers, in this way, is critically important, this research seeks to problematize the very nature of our ontological horizon that formulates these understandings. By examining my own mis-understanding(s) and mis-projections of teacher-identity and subjectivity, this analysis seeks to uncover the spaces of being that exist prior to our understandings of self as a stable subject in reality. What this shift in perspective uncovers is that *the way we perceive a problem is always-already the problem itself*.<sup>11</sup> For

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<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 28.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 29.

<sup>11</sup> This formulation will become the central axiom/mantra of this research across all five chapters.

example, as a critical educator, I know that standardized curriculum does not fully reflect students' experiences or reflect the circumstances of my daily teaching. Nonetheless, I still make changes to my lesson plans and implement pedagogical strategies to ensure that my students are able to score well on standardized achievement markers. Despite my resistance, as such, I am pathologically anxious over meeting the terms of the system's output demands (e.g., common core, AP test scores, college admissions, etc.), which ultimately determine my "success" within the machinery of education. Thus, I am forced to hysterically address the system as the big Other such that the Symbolic serves as the standard against which I define my self-identity.<sup>12</sup>

From a Lacanian perspective, the big Other is the symbolic space and discourse that forms our intersubjective network constitutive of all meaning.<sup>13</sup> Extending this outward, the big Other, for Žižek,<sup>14</sup> is the social substance—or rules of the game—that mediates all relations between subjects. It is on account of the big Other that the subject never fully dominates her/his actions. Returning to the example of John Nada, after a prolonged confrontation, Frank finally does relent and don the ideological glasses. According to Žižek, as was alluded to in the preceding, this is because of the pain of freedom or the "extreme violence of liberation."<sup>15</sup> However, what is paradoxical about the nature of Nada and Frank's fight from the beginning is Frank's very resistance to wearing the glasses. Earlier in the film, Frank relates to Nada that he was forced to leave his wife and children in Detroit to relocate in Los Angeles for work. More importantly, Frank states, "We gave the steel mills a break when they needed it. And do you

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<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Kelsey Wood, *Žižek: A Reader's Guide* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Black, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Matrix or Two Sides of Perversion." in *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments*, ed. Joel Weiss, Jason Nolan, Jeremy Hunsinger and Peter Trifonas, (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2006) 1549.

<sup>15</sup> *Perverts Guide to Ideology*, directed by Sophie Fineness and Slavoj Žižek (London: Zeitgeist Films, 2012), DVD.



know what they gave themselves? Raises! The golden rule—he who has the gold makes the rules.”<sup>16</sup>

Based on the establishment of Frank’s character, it would appear his sense of outrage at the systemic injustice and societal unfairness—a collective knowledge Gramsci<sup>17</sup> defines as good-sense beliefs—indicates he is already aware of the images he is likely to see wearing the glasses. Thus, the question remains why does Frank exhibit such resistance? On the surface, it may be that taking the step from *knowing* to *seeing* is, in fact, a painful experience. However, if examined in reference to the big Other, we begin to see how the big Other is not only a Symbolic network mediating social relations but also the locus of belief.<sup>18</sup> Belief, in this way, is externalized insofar as it is always belief through the (big) Other. Even from Frank’s cynical position, his belief in the injustice of the system, in order for reality to remain operative (i.e. appear whole) it is necessary to believe in the belief of the Other. By returning to McLaren’s quote in the preceding, the elite groups that “preserve social structure and hegemony” are not the big Other. Rather, it is the subject’s belief in this structure that is the operative function of the big Other.

As I will highlight at numerous points throughout this text, using myself as an example and McLaren’s writing as an axiomatic peg, the critical pedagogical position necessitates that someone, somewhere, still believes-or, more aptly, refuses to wear Nada’s glasses. In this way, critical pedagogy necessitates a belief that subjects somewhere are still caught in the traditional, Marxist *dispositif*: the subject (students/teachers) who does not know that they believe. As teachers, however, many of us find ourselves in a similar position to Frank. Many teachers are

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<sup>16</sup> *They Live*, directed by John Carpenter (Hollywood: Universal Pictures, 1988), DVD.

<sup>17</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

<sup>18</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

well aware of the structural illusions undergirding the system's failures but still do not renounce them. Working among these constructs of the logic of the fetish, a fundamental problem that undermines my teaching is that I am (un)consciously aware that standardized curriculum is (for example) not a representative evaluator of learning or instruction. However, within the daily context of my classroom, I continue to act-through its teaching—as though it is. Thus, in a strictly codified way, whether I care or do not care about my students is rendered inconsequential because I cannot offer them any real assurance (about their achievement) without the acknowledgment of the big Other. This disjunction, not the ideological mystification of false consciousness, typifies why it is necessary to reexamine the subjective sticking points of ideology and challenge education's predilection with questions of epistemology. In other terms, what is unveiled in this movement is that the subjective illusion remains always-already written into the situation itself. As with the above example, I maintain the appearance of a critical pedagogue and radical educator while continually reproducing the hegemonic system I proclaim to resist.

Foundational questions of education and resistance, as such, necessitate an examination into the state of the subject's being that are beyond mere questions of knowing. The necessity of this re-examination follows the problematic nature of teaching itself, such that, every time I speak, a "question mark" appears over what I have said because a piece of me (as teacher-subject) is always lacking.<sup>19</sup> While this lack is inherent to the Symbolic order, it is the function of ideology to camouflage the Real antagonism within any system. For example, the underlying logic of critical pedagogy is predicated upon a state of wholeness—Freire's whole acting upon the

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<sup>19</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 111.

world<sup>20</sup>—to which the oppressed could return if the hegemonic apparatus could be subverted.<sup>21</sup> It is, however, the big Other that unifies this discourse by imparting to it a performative dimension thereby causing the subject to act upon a fantasy (societal unity) rather than the antagonism (a priori lack/antagonism). As a critical educator, I fetishize the fantasy and garner a perverse pleasure from continually trying to capture the lost object (*object a*), which offers a semblance of subjective closure by always falling short.

By calling into question the ontological consistency of the radical position, the subject—as a critical pedagogical teacher—is exposed as persisting only as long as the revolution continues to fail. As I will exemplify through my own subjective search for wholeness through pedagogical critique, the process will not and cannot result in the discovery of something lost because such an object never existed in the first place. Instead, it is through fantasy that the possibility of the object is embodied as an indefinable, rapturous something that we experience as missing in our lives. That is to say, by enshrining what is believed to be missing, the loss becomes possible by presupposing the loss itself. By way of contrast, in drawing on Žižek’s “radical attempt to ground subjectivity qua subjectivity into objectivity,”<sup>22</sup> this research does not seek to find a hidden objective reality of thought but uses the Žižekian lens to ground teacher subjectivity in its negative character in the Real. The importance of this grounding is that the Lacanian Real represents that which exceeds what can be imagined or symbolized by the subject but is manifest as antagonism within and between the Imaginary and Symbolic registers. My consciousness as teacher, in reference to the Real, can thus be described always integrally linked

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<sup>20</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> Peter McLaren, “Critical Pedagogy and Class Struggle in the Age of Neoliberal Globalization: Notes from History’s Underside 1,” *Democracy & Nature* 9, no. 1 (2003) 65.

<sup>22</sup> Agon Hamza, “Going to One’s Ground: Žižek’s Dialectical Materialism,” in *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical Materialism*, ed. by Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015) 164.

to an experience of incommensurability—what Žižek calls the subject “out of joint.”<sup>23</sup> This experience of lack or negativity may indicate the subject’s proximity to the Real, but the Real cannot be identified as a positively existing entity or property that we can define within the banality of our everyday experience. The Real, as a consequence, is repressed from our consciousness (i.e. is not simply a part of objective reality) and simultaneously represents a critical point of reflexive analysis in our attempt to better understand our self-identity as teachers.

Given the illusionary nature of my position as a radical educator—and of subjective wholeness itself—the larger philosophical movement of this analysis seeks to develop a negative ontology of teacher-identity. Following Žižek, a negative ontology of teacher identity, seeks to avoid the radical contingency of the postmodern project by circumventing its relativism and developing the universal—to be discovered by the subject—as *negative a priori*. Or, in other terms, that which always returns as the “same” in any disclosure is the Lacanian Real as ontological difference, the inconsistency or gap that divides any “one” from itself. For teachers, the ability to distinguish between the daily life-world of existence and the Real necessitates a dialectical understanding between universal necessity and particular contingency. Education, in such terms, always-already involves what it is not and this universal is enunciated through a relative locus in the constellation of social positions. Thus, instead of a conception of knowledge as universal truth that pushes the postmodern subject to sift through competing forces of temporary truths<sup>24</sup>,

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<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1993) 12.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Samuels, *New Media, Critical Studies, and Critical Theory After Postmodernism: Žižek to Laclau*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

universal truth, as negative *a priori*, is a dialectical process of becoming manifest as antagonism and alienation.<sup>25</sup>

The paradoxical situatedness of the two positions I have outlined in the preceding—(1) the subject blinded by (un)conscious desire acting upon a subjective fantasy and (2) the alienated subject—calls into question the connection between my view of real(ity) and my subjective understanding of self-identity. According to Žižek, the actuality of life is “structured by reference to symbolic fictions,” such that any examination of the Real involves what he calls “*tarrying with the negative*.”<sup>26</sup> While symbolic fiction has a fantasmatic quality, it nevertheless possesses the power to structure identities and prevent the subject from realizing the void that is inherent to reality. As we have discussed previously, this is the function of the big Other; but, regardless of whether Nada and Frank are wearing the glasses, the void in the Symbolic register (that is the Real itself) only emerges by tarrying with the negative. Education qua the pedagogical has a similar quality. Education, as a structure, functions like the Symbolic big Other—defining the rules of the game that mediate social relations and the standards against which I define myself as a teacher. Education, in this way, is intertwined with the unconscious materiality of the teacher-subject becoming increasingly invested with the fantasy scenarios that drive the subject’s sense of identity. What was once pure negativity now “acquires a positive, determinate being”<sup>27</sup> (reality) for the subject. This intrusion then presents itself as an outward manifestation qua the pedagogical thereby projecting the fantasy ideal that resides in the

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<sup>25</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>26</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, rev. ed (New York; London: Routledge, 2001) 53.

<sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, rev. ed (New York; London: Routledge, 2001).

unconscious; or what is inscribed into the structure of the educational apparatus, now appears as truth itself.

By tarrying with the negative, this chapter attempts to articulate a reflexive position from which teachers can resist this perverse logic. The violence of this reflexive position is based on Hegel's logic of reflection<sup>28</sup> where there is nothing before the loss. Thus, each illustration both deteriorates the ideal of a primordial unity and moves me closer to an ontological space of nothingness wherein my teaching self persists only as self-relating negativity. From such a position, for example, it becomes possible for the critical teacher to act in opposition to the formulation of the fetishistic disavowal, announcing the fetish itself thereby exposing the teacher as the fetishist unable to accept his or her own impossibility. The fetish object, as such, is uncovered, functioning as the reflexive point through which the teacher can begin to articulate her/his own emptiness in the Symbolic (negativity) and the illusion of subjective wholeness. The trauma of such an encounter is a questioning of the validity of all teachers' perception(s) that highlight how shifts in teacher ontology can radically alter the reality of what we call education.

### **The Stupidity of the Name Teacher**

To begin from the proceeding definitions of alienation, however, would be to proceed too quickly. Instead, it is necessary as Lenin compels us, "to begin again from the beginning"<sup>29</sup> so that we have no illusions about our position. On this condition I frame this text with the most banal of questions: *why did I become a teacher?* My response, as my narrative will explicate, uncovers a fantasy structure that defiantly propagates my desire to teach. Located in the

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<sup>28</sup> see G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2010)

<sup>29</sup> V. I. Lenin, "Notes of a Publicist," trans. David Skvirsky and George Hanna, in *Lenin's Collected Works*, vol. 33 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965).

unconscious, my story begins with a disproportionate attachment to my own fantasmatic story of ineffective teachers perpetually failing students (like me) within an Orwellian like system of (re)production. My own teaching, in response, was driven by a desire to resist the hegemonic structure(s) I perceived as the bedrock of the educational system itself—a desire hyperbolically amplified by my personal leftist (political) philosophy. Following this frame, we might tersely define the root of this research with the following question: how it might be possible to (1) deconstruct (non-Derridean) my own perceptions of self, relative to the critical pedagogical frame and (2) articulate a basic conceptualization of how Žižek’s notion of tarrying with the negative might be reflexively entangled with teacher research. In view of this position, the specific intent of this analysis is not a critique of critical pedagogy; rather, it is an unwinding of my understanding(s) of self in relation to the critical pedagogical frame and my failures as critical educator as a movement toward the articulation of a coming after—a radical pedagogy that is beyond traditional and critical frames.

Arriving for my first day of school—wearing jeans, boots, and a worn military jacket—I manically prepared for my first lesson by both politicizing and propagandizing the everyday images of our space. Being of from a large midwestern city, includes an (un)conscious understanding of being that involves both a daily and historical reality of violence, power inequity, and corruption that are specific to that city. We might imagine this perspective, again, through the viewpoint of John Nada. Just as Nada’s glasses allow him to see beyond the veil, the people of the city have a distinct knowledge of the grime beneath the city’s picturesque beauty. As a teacher, I assumed my students’ temporal horizon of knowledge and experience would be easily sutured to critical readings of the world—from which there could be created a visceral mode of inquiry for the class. But beneath this hopeful and idealistic frame, I was, of course,

further fueled by the rage of striking out against the system I believed had failed me. Perceiving myself as having already been cast out of the system I was re-entering, I was desperate to define myself in opposition to this structure—i.e. as a *radical educator*.<sup>30</sup>

This formulation of subjectivity follows Rancière's reading of the *part of no part*<sup>31</sup> in that I believed I was always-already lacking an individual sense of identity in the system. Not dissimilar to Freire's<sup>32</sup> oppressed, the part of no part within any social system has no voice or place within the social system. For Rancière, both politics and its resistance revolve around this position in response to the systematic distribution of visible and invisible positions in what he calls the *distribution of the sensible*:

A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution.<sup>33</sup>

In Lacanese, this distribution is the function of the big Other whereby the subject is the lack in the order of being. It can be said that the subject is always lacking because there is no signifier to express the subject-in-itself and the subject is always seeking that which it lacks. On account of my perceived dislocation from a determinate place within the educational apparatus, I began fetishizing externalized objects and images in an attempt to suture the cracks in my ontological

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<sup>30</sup> This position is complex because while I perceived my-self as being 'cast out,' my position as a teacher indicates an ex/implicit inclusion in the system.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 1970).

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2004) 12.



horizon. In *Capital (Vol. 1)*, Marx anticipates Lacan's reading of lack through his formulation of commodity fetishism: "only by being reflected in another man—that is, insofar as this other man offers it an image of its unity—can the ego arrive at its self-identity; identity and alienation are thus strictly correlative."<sup>34</sup> From my position as a teacher, I turned toward other teachers—just as Nada turned toward Frank—desperately seeking any confirmation of my identity. However, while this intersubjective exchange creates a fantasmatic reflection of wholeness (the body of B becomes for A the mirror of its value) each projection only deepened my sense of alienation and anxiety. This reflective displacement also fed the (un)conscious belief that not only could I be replaced *by* individuals, but also replaced *with* them.<sup>35</sup>

As an explication of the critical pedagogical perspective, this position is easily described within the neoliberal discourse of education such that all teachers face a substanceless subjectivity—alienated from Symbolic reality; the teacher, as such, is *proletarian*.<sup>36</sup> From a Marxist position, Althusser describes alienation as the subject's participation in some social program. But, for Lacan, misrecognition occurs in a much more fundamental way. My construction of self-identity as a teacher is an attempt to reconcile my view of self with the view I suppose others have of me. For example, as a new teacher I needed to believe I was making a difference in the lives of my students to be able to function in my professional role. This, of course, is a primary motivation behind many new teachers' actions and beliefs. This personal need becomes the primary impetus behind teachers' alignment with whatever collectively defined ideological program through which they self-identify and establishes an (un)conscious vision of teaching (e.g. pedagogical strategies, teacher/student relationships, etc). It is within this

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<sup>34</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital (Vol. 1)* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1867] 1976) 20.

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "How to Begin from the Beginning," *New Left Review* no 57, (2009), 43.

formulation that I identified with the critical pedagogical frame and understood my-self as a response to externally imposed performative criteria. While Marxist notions of consciousness account for this movement/moment of misrecognition, through the Žižekian lens, when we encounter our failure, there is no redemption. The Lacanian mirror, in this sense, is broken: every reflection is an awkwardly located fragment of self, failing to reconcile with each other. As a consequence, teachers are caught in a never-ending attempt to capture an understanding of his/herself identity in relation to the world.

While I do not take up the traditional, critical (i.e., Marxist) critique of neoliberalism here, this formulation situates my-self, as the subject of this text, within the larger political terrain of educational research—particularly within and against the philosophical complex of the AERA.<sup>37</sup> The complex of the AERA represents an attempt to control what Hardt and Negri call the commons—the shared substance of our social being whose privatization is a violent act that should be resisted by force.<sup>38</sup> The discursive enclosure of our thinking is often represented in education through Foucault’s theory of subjectivation<sup>39</sup> whereby the subject (as teacher) recognizes, internalizes, and constructs him/herself in accordance with scientific discourses and norms of behavior. Under the conditions of modernity, the subject is a product of such regimes of normalization inside which the self (dis)appears. The teacher, as a result our subjectivization, becomes an alienated correlate of mechanisms of power/knowledge which the individual formulates as an external identity.<sup>40</sup> Thus, there is no subjective place outside the manifold

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<sup>37</sup> The American Education Research Association is referenced here because of its status as the United States’ largest educational research organization and its problematic status among many on the political and philosophical left within educational research.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009)

<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality* (Vol. 2), trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Frédéric Gros, "'Course Context' in Michel Foucault." In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, ed by Frédéric Gros (New York: Picador, 2006) 507.

discourses of power as resistance in inextricably entwined with power. This implies the subject cannot posit itself effectively beyond discourse or assert itself beyond the mechanisms of power.<sup>41</sup>

For Žižek, subjectivity is, instead, an obscene joke of our reality repeated every time we see our reflection. For him the subject is *less than nothing* (and more than everything) and in our reflection there is an unconscious horror prior to the moment of our own recognition.<sup>42</sup> But it is in this moment of delay, the gap between being and knowing, that the subject experiences the self in its purest form.<sup>43</sup> This formulation of subjectivity is based on the Lacanian thesis that the self is empty and unable to match its own substance to itself because of an “obstinate repetitive fixation on a contingent object that subtracts the subject from its direct immersion in reality.”<sup>44</sup> From this position, it is possible to see how a teacher is alienated from the daily context of their reality, divided from itself, and able to dream only through a fantasy object. The primordial experience of my-self as a teacher was (/will always be) thus an experience of (pure) negativity. This negativity was, at its most basic, expressed in the withering of idealism—the belief in the dream of teaching—over the course of my teaching career. More than mere pragmatism, this decay in my reflexive positionality served as a fulcrum for change by representing the real loss of my identity (in)to the hegemonic abyss of the structure of education.

Hegel’s argument is that the “subject does not survive the ordeal of negativity: he effectively loses his very essence and passes over into his Other.”<sup>45</sup> The Other in this sense

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<sup>41</sup> While I do not maintain Foucault’s formulation of subjectivity, it is a helpful starting point to understand education as a discourse and dominant readings of the subject in education. Further, it highlights one of the multiple philosophical issues with academic conferences I analyze in: *Pseudo-Intellectualism and the Academic Conference: Resisting the Impotent Circle of Self-Gratification*.

<sup>42</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>43</sup> Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2005)

<sup>44</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012) 496.

<sup>45</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (London: Continuum, 2005) 200.

represents the big Other or hegemonic discourse of the educational apparatus, and my essence was the dream I clung to—that a radical teacher can change the world one child at a time. Over time, however, the system drew each of us as teachers into closer proximity with one another until the Other subsumed my essence—i.e., I, as a teacher-subject, arrived at the violent realization that the system was beyond my resistance. My subjective self—as critical pedagogical teacher—was always-already searching for something within me (whatever this *it* was) more than itself. This is a classical reading of Lacan’s *objet petit a*: I perpetually search in vain for a positive reality because reality has no such positive consistency.<sup>46</sup> My ontological self, as a teacher, was thus nothing but an objectification of the void that is reality itself. Or, the reality of my classroom was nothing but a series of discontinuities masking my own *alienation* in the signifier—bestowed upon me by the Symbolic discourse of education itself. It is in this way that there is no truth of meaning apart from alienation.

As a new teacher then, what I missed, by positing a Symbolic representation/identification as a radical educator, was my (un)conscious submission to critical ideology itself. In Lacanian terms, my embrace of the critical pedagogical perspective provided an alternative pathway offered by an-Other. While this place provided a sense of acceptance that restored the ego (false self) in the form of fantasy—i.e., I (un)consciously perceived the Other as having a positive view of me—it paradoxically reinforced the failure of my representation within the system itself. Because ideology creates particular effects in the libidinal economy, I unconsciously attached myself to the permanence and self-identity of the “I” in language.<sup>47</sup> My resistance, as a consequence, was always in part a response to an insufficiency in language and a forced choice caused by my inability to imagine a “real” self against the Symbolic mandate.

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<sup>46</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981).

<sup>47</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real* (London: Continuum, 2005).

Being a critical educator, in response, necessitated my readiness to give all of myself for the radical realization of change and a commitment to knowing that is constantly dissolved, (re)constructed, and turned back on itself. McLaren calls this idea(l) of radical change the “daily poetics” of teaching whereby the individual violently asserts his/her own subjectivity, creating a narrative space against the naturalized flow of the everyday.<sup>48</sup>

What this problem exemplifies, however, was that as a teacher I lacked the ability to separate reality from its symbolization—a condition which fundamentally undermines the paradigm of teaching. As a question of enunciation, “our descriptions do not naturally and immutably refer to things”; rather, things in retrospect begin to resemble their description.<sup>49</sup> However, in the daily context of my teaching, I continued to uphold a modernist logic of school(ing): *there is a reality out there to be found and “we” (teachers) can teach “you” (students) a language to accurately represent it*. Just as Kant was unwilling to accept that the sublime is the same as the monstrous (all that changes is the subject’s perspective on it),<sup>50</sup> I was unwilling or incapable of accepting that there is no necessary relationship between the reality we (teachers) perceive and its symbolization—i.e., my epistemological reference points did not immutably reference objects. Even within the critical paradigm, reality appears as somehow beyond the ideological (e.g., I convinced myself that if only my students could learn X, they could overcome the misapprehensions of false consciousness).

The totality of this interplay represents an attempt to construct an ontologically consistent world based on a *logic of truth*<sup>51</sup> that accepts as a given the ontological limits of being. However, because I was never able to definitively know what the big Other wants, I am always faced with

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<sup>48</sup> Peter McLaren, *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> Rex Butler, “Slavoj Žižek: What is a Master-Signifier,” *Lacan*. <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-signifier.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997).

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre XVII: L'envers de la Psychanalyse*, trans. J. Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

a gap, unsure of what was submission and what was resistance—or who I was as a teacher and what I was (ideologically and systematically mandated) to be. Within any school, there are multiple stories of what it is to be a good teacher to be negotiated. While no story will necessarily lend itself to any form of reconciliation, as a teacher, I still experienced the demands of each of them. Fantasy attempts to fill in these gaps between who I am and who I am supposed to be by unconsciously answering the question of who and what I am for the Other. From a critical pedagogical perspective, it is easy to imagine the other as the oppressed students I was working to serve. But, for Žižek, the image of the o/Other carries with it the massive weight of the ontological Real, forcing us to confront our ambiguous repulsions and fascinations—the forced insights into the non-existence and changeability of the big Other.<sup>52</sup> Regardless of my intentions, this gap always remained as a psychic inconsistency that plagued my (un)consciousness, the reflexive gap where everything falls apart.

Using the notion of my teaching persona, as an example, my subjective identity is an ontological response to the fantasy of my desire that fulfills the unfathomable X of the Other's desire. While I perceive this persona, the ideological and pedagogical stance of a radical educator, as what makes me worthy of the Other's desire, in actuality, it veils the irresolvable lack that terrorizes my subjective (un)consciousness. Rather than serving to close the breach in my identification within the Other, this position highlights how the subject is in the most radical sense “out of joint”—constitutively lacking its own place in the Symbolic.<sup>53</sup> Because of this incongruity, my position as a teacher must be understood as following the formula of the signifier—a stand-in for the stupidity that a name (teacher) refers to an object (the subject)

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<sup>52</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence,” in *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology*, Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>53</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) 12.

because that is what we call it (teacher).<sup>54</sup> This impersonal form announces the dimension of the big Other—the intersubjective network of signifiers—beyond other subjects. The oblique differentiability of this formulation leaves the teacher as always displaced by a minimal difference from the place he/she occupies. For example, as a teacher, the structure of the field of my understanding (signifier) is predicated on the redoubling of the object (the self-objectified) into itself and the place I occupy in the structure—i.e., the phenomenon of symbolic *reduplicatio*.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, as a teacher I can never absolutely “fit” in a place because there always remains a gap at the level of enunciation. Thus, I am never fully what my Symbolic mandate tells me that I am because I am always that thing (excess) and my own failure (void).

While on the surface this out of joint subjectivity might appear to overlap with the logic of domination that informs critical pedagogy,<sup>56</sup> the barred subject (\$) is significantly more compromised. For Lacan the barred subject is represented by (\$) because the subject is split between the ego—as false self— and the unconscious.<sup>57</sup> More specifically, the subject is barred and represented by the (\$) because the subject’s identity is divided (alienated) from itself—i.e. there is no thing (signifier) in which the subject can fully identify and, simultaneously, this lack is the subject. The teacher, as barred subject, is barred because he or she subjected to the Symbolic order beyond the intentionality of the ego’s false identity. The teacher’s consciousness, as such, is always divided between an-other object (image or person) and the ego itself as pure nothingness. As a teacher this resulted in (1) a narcissistic investment in external representations and (2) a continual repression of any awareness I encountered as a result of my failures or lack of

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<sup>54</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 3.

<sup>55</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> Peter McLaren, *Rage + Hope: Interviews with Peter McLaren on War, Imperialism, + Critical Pedagogy* (New York: P. Lang, 2006).

<sup>57</sup> Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

representation. In order for the ego to avoid a traumatic encounter with its own lack, this nothingness is (un)consciously projected into the place of the big Other creating the lack—or what Lacan calls the *objet (a)*—thereby reinforcing subject’s own desire and anxiety. In view of this position, rather than being an epistemological matter of distortion or even the hegemonic encasement of meaning to be overcome through pedagogical praxis, Lacan’s reading of the “I” is deprived of its innermost fantasmatic kernel, rendering the subject “a nothingness counted as something.”<sup>58</sup> Within the daily confines of my classroom, my obsessional quest to attain the impossible object (*objet a*) through knowledge (the Symbolic) resulted in a barred subjectivity (\$) in the form of universal negativity. In my reliance on a knowledge that is always-already there but inaccessible to me, I was left in the position of the obsessional teacher with no possibility other than to alienate myself in the dominant social system—education itself.

In *L’envers de la psychanalyse*, Lacan describes this form of Symbolic (re)production as an *a priori* matrix of passages from one discourse to another.<sup>59</sup> The discourse of education functions such that knowledge comes to legitimize forms of domination by positioning power beneath the “neutrality” of knowledge. Education, therefore, functions as a discursive matrix of representations and significations that obfuscates its structure through a constitutive formulation of the “*factual state of things*.”<sup>60</sup> Within this structure, the organizational discourse of education (re)produces a split mode of subjectivity—the barred subject (\$)—qua a universal negation whereby the subject’s unknowing is captured within the obsessive struggle to find the Real within the Symbolic. According to Lacan, this is the position of the obsessional subject or the

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<sup>58</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, New Ed. (London: Verso, 2008) 157.

<sup>59</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, Book XVII*, trans. Jacques Alain-Miller (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> Slavoj Žižek. *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004) 394.



subject that identifies with an Ideal Other who is already dead.<sup>61</sup> This position means that as a teacher I was alienated from my own desire and, because of my reliance on the idea of knowledge itself, I could never escape the fundamental alienation in the system.

As a critical educator, I believed the way out of this paradoxical position was tied to the belief that everything can be known, and alienation could be overcome by unveiling, re-appropriating, and remixing ideas for our own particular usage(s). What this position misses, however, is that since knowledge is located before the object, the limit of the Symbolic order (*objet a*) is itself shown to be produced by the Symbolic order. Thus, while the subject obsesses about capturing the Real within Symbolic knowledge, the Real constantly resists this symbolization. On this point, many in the field of education turn toward Judith Butler's psychoanalytic reading of symbolization whereby the Real is a "failure of discursive performativity to finally and fully establish the identity to which it refers."<sup>62</sup> While Butler's reading appears similar to Žižek's on the surface, there is a divergence over the fundamental consistency of the symbolic; particularly, as the symbolic relates to formations of subjective identity. In their collaborative text *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* this split is explicated as residing at the point of "negativity" or how each understands/interprets negativity – identified as a gap in self/identity – as it relates to hegemony and resistance.<sup>63</sup> By situating subjectivity within a point of negativity each renders the subject incomplete by way of an internal limit(s). The difference, however, ultimately lies in the limit itself. For Butler, this antagonism is located outside of symbolization in a pre-discursive material realm; while for Žižek, the Real is produced

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<sup>61</sup> Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>62</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 140.

<sup>63</sup> Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000).

by the failure of the Symbolic.<sup>64</sup> The antagonism, as such, is the gap of negativity that is both the meaning of internal limit and the very meaning of the (Lacanian) Real.

Following Žižek, the critical pedagogical position, consequently, is really just tantamount to an avoidance of the fundamental impossibility of the teacher's subjective position and an avoidance of such a traumatic encounter with the Real. Following Freud, Britzman describes teaching in similar terms, it is, for her, an impossible profession because of its constant uncertainty. The teacher's ineluctability is a structural incongruence, a position of pathological uncertainty between the concepts of *aporia* (unavoidable, unresolved dilemmas at the heart of our practice) and *praxis* (a teacher's rightful action that is at once good and just).<sup>65</sup> The disturbance of this encounter, rather than being a failure of positionality in itself, provides a glimpse at the subjective condition of ontological deadlock. By momentarily gazing into the nothingness that is the subject itself, the teacher is able to grasp the root alienation and self-contradiction that is the drive of dialectical thinking.<sup>66</sup> This empty point of negativity is not nothing but the inverse of everything, or the negation of all determinacy. *No-thing* is not *nothing* but the void(ing) of the internally situated world of appearances that is subjectivity itself. A teacher's subjective passage, in this way, represents the transition from an epistemological void to an ontological one; or, more precisely "the passage from the inaccessible Thing beyond the subject's reach to the subject itself as the Thing incapable of ever being reduced."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*. New ed. (London: Verso, 2008).

<sup>65</sup> Deborah P. Britzman, *The Very Thought of Education: Psychoanalysis and the Impossible Professions* (Albany: State University of New York, 2009).

<sup>66</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>67</sup> Johnston, Adrian, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008) 140.

## Radical Pedagogy

Once the violence of this position is established it becomes possible to imagine negative ontology as a perverse reading of critical praxis. The ontological deadlock of the subject condition subsequently creates a pedagogical space beyond critical pedagogy whereby a *praxis of nothingness* reflexively liberates the subject in its understanding of self-identity as the Real of failure itself. Žižek reminds us of the socio-political potentiality of finding zero, or the void; positing a collective goal of self-negation that voids all determinate meaning. The normality of a reflective teacher, in contrast, is an apocalyptic subject whose inaction is both a “no” and a “yes,” a feeble gesture that binds the teacher to the liminal definitions of Symbolic ideology.<sup>68</sup> To proceed outside this position necessitates a pathological reflexivity fixated on the pure indeterminacy of our own position. This opening wrenches at the subjective mask, exposing a subjectivity that is neither being *nor* non-being, but the unrealized that is the teacher as the void itself.<sup>69</sup> From a position of pure abstraction, the radical pedagogical frame provides the coordinates for the teacher to obtain distance from the fantasy within the traumatic core of radical contradiction.

The subjective destitution of this reflective possibility makes it imaginable to proceed toward a radical untethering of my own pedagogical frame, a space beyond the critical where shared understanding(s) emerge from the possibility of enunciating the otherness of the Other. This position, far from marking the end of my own necessity as a teacher, opens the possibility of redefining the coordinates of my ontological horizon through the exploration of the liberatory potential of loss itself. Following Žižek, the empty space of primordial loss is a substantiation of Descartes’ withdrawal into self as universal doubt. Or, my self-reflexivity as a teacher is an

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<sup>68</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>69</sup> Lacan, Jacques, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981) 30.

intentional movement toward the madness of absolute negativity that preserves the necessity of the reflexive subject itself. The madness of self-reflexivity, in this way, serves as a vanishing mediator between the thing and its representation such that my withdrawal into self culminates in a radical negativity from which I can no longer attempt to escape without accounting for the terrifying deadlock of the Real.<sup>70</sup>

Returning to interplay between Nada and Frank as narrative exemplar, as the film progresses Nada's character increasingly emerges as an oppositional signifier, a kind of template for other identities to use as an imprint. In this way, Nada serves as a vanishing mediator between the thing (Frank) and its representation— a process we see played out in the following dialogue:

*Frank:* I got a job now and I plan on keeping it. I'm walking a white line all the time. I don't bother nobody. Nobody bothers me. You better start doing the same!

*Nada:* White line's in the middle of the road. That's the worst place to drive.

The Žižekian twist, however, is that even once the subject encounters its own deadlock and posits this experience as such, the alienation of the Real is masked again by the *objet petit a*. Thus, despite Nada's appearance as having accepted his position of negativity, it is necessary to consider his return to a position of alienation. Is Nada's fantasy of resistance not similar to my own fantasy construction of wholeness that sustained my self-identity? The delineation, however, is that after an encounter with the Real, the reflexive position does not return to the beginning but begins anew with an (un)conscious sense of being. The reality of myself as a teacher, because of this, began to fissure while trying to maintain an ontologically consistent self through the fetishization of my teaching as a means of fulfilling my desire. Desire, at its most

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<sup>70</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, New Ed. (London: Verso, 2008).

basic, is the essence of Symbolic subjectivity and the non-acceptance of our ultimate closure of being.<sup>71</sup> In the classroom, this emerged as a fetishization of my students (as the objects of my desire) and a concretization of my own Symbolic function in an attempt to produce a self-identity I (mis)recognized as without gaps. Here again we see Britzman's tension emerge as I struggle to construct a sense of self-identity but the gap that is my self-identity serves as a constant source of torsion that cannot be resolved without at least partial compromise. In the end, the mounting strain of this internal conflict created an overwhelming desire for substantiation.

In response, critical pedagogy, as both a method and a process that grapples with the ever contradictory and contested nature of self,<sup>72</sup> appeared to provide me with an external unified structure in which I could identify both aspects of my-self. The problem, however, was that within the daily context of my teaching, my desire for resistance was translated into the demands of the big Other compelling me to account for my success through the correlative achievement of my students or risk being cast as a failure. More simplistically, my radical identity was a cover story I sought and produced to make the daily reality of my existence more tenable. This subterfuge made it possible to believe I was engaging in acts of radical, pedagogical departure but, in actuality, I found myself in a position that was at least partially caught in the dominant gaze. The big Other, in this way, governs the performative dimension of reality so that the subject must (un)consciously appeal to it for knowledge (i.e., the rules of the game) because the subject is both alienated from direct access to reality and believes the big Other has (control of) the answers.

From a Kantian perspective, the world of teacher's experience is a kind of illusion or an inferior version of what is real. Experience, as such, is based on what appears to them, and

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<sup>71</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "An Answer to Two Questions," in Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009) 212.

<sup>72</sup> Henry Giroux, *On Critical Pedagogy* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011).

appearances, as appearances, can only be of the subject—not in the objects themselves. As a consequence, the Kantian *thing-in-itself* allows for an awareness of a subjective space between what is experienced and the subject doing the experiencing. On this condition, the application of Kant's transcendental turn allows us to imagine the teacher's ontology as both her/his intelligibility in which being exists and the recognition of her/his subjectivity as irresolvedly divided from the nature of things (pure negativity). It is this role of ontological lack itself that grounds our being absolutely by uncovering the subject's epistemological limitations as the conditions of possibility in knowledge or what might be called the necessity of self-ignorance:

The paradox of self-consciousness [in Kant] is that it is possible only against the background of its own impossibility. I am conscious of myself only in so far as I am out of reach of myself qua the real kernel of my being.<sup>73</sup>

As an endeavor to “heal the wound of the primordial repression,”<sup>74</sup> Kantian metaphysics “retroactively creates the conditions of its possibility by instituting the illusion of a fully transparent self-consciousness via the primordial repression of the subject's self-splitting.”<sup>75</sup> The notion of self-consciousness therefore always-already implies the subject's decenterment. The problem, however, for Žižek, is that Kant allocates the ontological gap to the domain of epistemology by locating negativity in the space between the subject's experience of phenomena and the thing-in-itself. Instead of forcibly identifying the contours of the ontological crack, this formulation allows the teacher to remain in the position of the obsessional subject and naively believe that they are located beyond the Other.

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<sup>73</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) 14.

<sup>74</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) 15.

<sup>75</sup> Heiko Feldner and Fabio Vighi, *Critical Theory and the Crisis of Contemporary Capitalism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

## My Precious Fantasy is Shit

In response, the final movement necessary in imagining a radical pedagogy is the articulation of how subjective ambiguities are not merely epistemological but always also ontological. For Žižek, this undertaking is a parallax reading of subjective perception that renders “the subject’s gaze [as] always already inscribed into the perceived object itself”<sup>76</sup>— in the very manner by which the world relates to itself, no matter how paradoxically. By tarrying with the pedagogical in this way, the teacher metaphorically glimpses the Real of its own subjectivity in the incommensurability between the subject’s ontic life world and its a priori, understanding of reality. These moments become visible in the perceptual displacements that screen out perceptions of reality.

To expose the palatial tensions and problematic nature of my subjective vantage point, I explore Žižek’s analysis of Polish film director Krzysztof Kieslowski.<sup>77</sup> Examining the lives of people in Poland in the 1980s, Kieslowski started his career as a documentary filmmaker. But as Kieslowski captured the emotional testimony of his subjects, he became uneasy about the intrusiveness of its portrayal on film. His solution was to create fiction films rather than documentaries because the former would allow him to better access the emotional content of the lives he wished to explore. Žižek argues that the real-life actors in Kieslowski’s films create an uncanny overlapping between real and fiction: “[the actor] does not immediately display his innermost stance; it is rather that, in a reflective attitude, he ‘plays himself’ by way of imitating

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<sup>76</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006) 17.

<sup>77</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fear of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

what he perceives as his own ideal image.”<sup>78</sup> The resulting interplay is an expression of the reality of life that can only be mediated through the subjectively produced fantasy of it. In my own reflections as teacher, I played out the Kieslowski documentary by (un)consciously distancing myself from the Real of the moment through the invention of stories about the reality of reflections I sought to capture. Like Kieslowski’s subjects, in my very attempt to camouflage the irreconcilable intrusions at the core of my subjectivity, I brought them into existence. In other words, even in my descriptions of avoidance, I brought the Kantian thing-in-itself into being.

While it is never possible to seize the Real, each momentary glimpse into the horror of my teaching accounted for an understanding of reality that was anamorphically distorted and fragmented beneath a multiplicity of appearances (of the same ontological position). The reflexive object, as such, does not exist objectively outside of this distortion because it is, in itself, nothing but the embodiment of nothingness.<sup>79</sup> While critical pedagogy acknowledges that there is no neutral position, it falls short of acknowledging the truth of the Other and the subject’s *a priori* alienation. The difference in positions—between critical pedagogy and a negative ontology—is thus in the act of pushing the teacher’s perception beyond his/her present understanding. Even from a position of pedagogical resistance, an object must be understood positionally as only assuming clear and distinct features if viewed from an angle. Even then, the undistorted image is only momentarily brought into full view of the teacher’s temporal existence. Lacan’s analysis of the skull floating at the feet of Holbein’s Ambassadors (see Figure 2) exemplifies how difficult it can be to see an object even if it is located directly within our gaze.

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<sup>78</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) 75.

<sup>79</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).



The undistorted image of the anamorphic skull exemplifies how a thing can only be truly seen by *looking awry*, the cost of which is that the rest of the image momentarily appears out of focus.



Figure 1.1: Han Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, 1533. London, *The National Gallery*.

Thus, the manifestation of any distortion, though viewed from a certain perspective, is nothing that assumes the shape of something.<sup>80</sup> The scene of my own classroom, as such, was always-already compromised and out-of-focus. My reflections of the scene, like Holbein's painting, contained the traps of the gaze, making visible to me something that can only amount to the subject annihilated.<sup>81</sup>

With this in mind, the radical pedagogical position is imagined here as a mode of teacher reflexivity whereby the object of subject's eye is gazing back upon itself. From such a position, the teacher is confronted by the primordial reflection of their own nothingness—momentarily exposing the fragility between the Symbolic and the chaos of the Real. Lacan intimately traces the relationship between the two such that the gaze threatens to undo all desire through an outburst of the Real: “at the heart of desire is a misrecognition of fullness where there is really

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<sup>80</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981).

<sup>81</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981) 83.

nothing but a screen for my own narcissistic projections.”<sup>82</sup> From this position the object that had transfixed me to critical pedagogy emerged as I clung to the potentiality of an ontological state of wholeness. As a positivization of being, critical pedagogy appears possible through the dismantling of oppressive systems of knowledge thereby opening spaces for the production of horizons of non-alienation—the Freirean whole acting in the world.<sup>83</sup> This wholeness, as the object of irrational injunction, propagates a fantasy (inseparable from the formation of the ideal ego) where human beings are no longer abstracted and oppressed, forced to live a fragmentary existence, under asymmetric systems of power.<sup>84</sup> Thus, the underlying logic of the critical pathos posits a state of being to which the subject could return if hegemonic paradigm could be subverted.

This fundamental idea(l) allowed me as a teacher to cling to vestiges of a non-fragmented self-identity. In this falsification, the ego effaces its own otherness by constructing the fantasy image of wholeness, thereby masking the subject’s very alienation in the image that constitutes it. By concealing the inconsistencies and gaps that occlude the void of the Real, my ideological fantasy of a critical teaching self unfolded, progressively unmasking my inner lack, and presenting the lost object as in the possession of the big Other. Within the structure of this frame, I perceived the big Other as having access to this lost object, further reinforcing the ideological belief that “they” are a threat to “my” being. The ideological fantasy, as a result of this, continues to occlude the incompleteness of reality, allowing me to behave as if it were possible to grasp the lost object (*objet a*) and reconcile the part of inner being lost when I became a subject. With each

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<sup>82</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981).

<sup>83</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 1970).

<sup>84</sup> Peter McLaren, “Critical Pedagogy and Class Struggle in the Age of Neoliberal Globalization: Notes from History’s Underside 1,” *Democracy & Nature* 9, no. 1 (2003) 65.

act of resistance, I perceived myself as retrieving little bits of the object—for example, by subtly undermining my own administration or by teaching my students the “truth” about the system that will always oppress them. But after each act, I was always left searching, questioning my own pedagogical potentiality, asking, *why doesn't this feel emancipatory?*

It was precisely this failure of the emancipatory, however, that bound me to my students and the ideological potentiality of critical pedagogy. Each encounter with the Other was driven by the unfulfilled desire for wholeness, but in each failure, I experienced momentary *jouissance*. For Žižek, *jouissance* is a surplus-enjoyment that emerges in response to the anger caused by my lack of fulfillment and wholeness in the Other. This distress generates enjoyment through a “reversal-into-itself” by means of the subjective expressions of pain and discomfort.<sup>85</sup> The ultimate paradox of my critical positionality was that it is only in the Other, whom I constantly resist, that my resistance registers in the Symbolic network. Unlike the subjugating gaze of the critical lens, the gaze of the big Other, before which I (un)consciously imagine myself performing, provides the point of symbolic identification. The Other's gaze, in this way, enabled me to act by suturing my understanding to my teaching practice. For example, instead of experiencing the state and education as a labyrinth of branches and regulations in my daily activities, I was able to posit the state as a singular hegemonic big Other that is aware of what I was doing. Within this framework, I understood myself in relation to an enemy to whom I was responding.

Critical pedagogy, consequently, functioned to bind me to a particular set of social relations and a horizon of understanding, making it very difficult for me to break out of the situation. Even in my perceived radical resistance, I was only ever acting in accordance to my

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<sup>85</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Love Thy Neighbor, No Thanks!” in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, ed. Christopher Lane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 156.

desire—the mythical return to “it”—a desire attached to a seemingly inescapable set of hierarchical relations and patterns of domination. Unconsciously, I was perpetually tormented by the closeness of the Other because such closeness threatened to reveal the Other as never being able to accommodate my desire for wholeness. Thus, in my subjective position as a teacher, I could only thrive by longing for closeness itself because it preserved the fantasmatic illusion that the Other had the key to my identity and provided an opportunity to a sublime wholeness if resisted. The maintenance of my-self as a radical educator thus required that the *revolution always failed*. This failure, as such, allowed me to keep up appearances because the narratives I constructed could never quite catch up with me thereby allowing me to continue on in resistance indefinitely.

In Lacanian terms, the essential point of impossibility is the motivation behind life and is located in a desire that always mistakes its object.<sup>86</sup> My teaching, as such, was constructed around narratives that could never be actualized, displaced in a future that could never be satisfied if I arrived at my destination. As Žižek notes, the subject derives a perverse pleasure from working toward particular formulas of being as a behavioral manifestation of what Freud calls drive: “a closed, self-propelling loop of repeating the same gesture and finding satisfaction in it.”<sup>87</sup> While new teachers may find satisfaction from following the rules, thereby relieving them from making decisions in unfamiliar spaces, it might be said that the critical theorist finds comfort in the perpetual failure of her/his own resistance. By being marred in the act of rebellion itself, I ensured my own indefinite status as a revolutionary educator.

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<sup>86</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>87</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 63.

Žižek warns, in this vein, against the attainment of our desires: “we don’t really want to get what we think that we desire.”<sup>88</sup> For example, as I was repeatedly faced with the glancing images of the negative, I was left to experience the absence of the anaphoric big Other which caused a short-circuiting in my ontological edifice. In other terms, such a position caused glitches in my everyday perception of being that exposed the fantasy structure of my self-referential importance. With each deteriorating representation of reality, the chaos beneath my own paranoid fantasies returned a nothingness mirrored by the terrifying Real of the unmasked teacher standing before me. It is here, in the gaze turned inward onto itself, that I saw the horrifying substance of my critical pedagogical practices. The truth of my reality was that the primary impetus behind my “radical” teaching had never raised students’ consciousness or a liberatory critique of the system that subjugates them. Rather, my motivation had been the fulfillment of a fundamental narcissism, a pedagogical stance that realized my political desire to be a radical, and that consummated my engagement in a critique of the system that both created an Other to be resisted and perpetually (re-)defined my role in its resistance. By grasping at what I desired, I was forced to realize the entirety of my teaching career has been fraudulent, and not only had I not been acting on my students’ behalf, I had also, in actuality, been furthering their subjugation.

Utterly debilitated as a teacher, I realized my very identity was supported by the structure of educational apparatus I sought to resist. Further, I derived a perverse pleasure from being forced to implement the hegemonic mandates of my subjugation because they ensured both my Symbolic obscura and my fantasmatic ideals. Thus, it was only outside of this structure that my sly smile deteriorated, and I was forced to acknowledge that real subjective freedom had always

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<sup>88</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Why Be Happy When You can be Interesting,” *Big Think*. <http://bigthink.com/videos/why-be-happy-when-you-could-be-interesting>

been unattainable from the beginning. The reflexive consequences of this realization are catastrophic as the entire fantasy structure falters, uncovering the ideological falsity of the subject that is a part of a greater wholeness. What both notions “repress” is the fact that there never was a balanced (or self-enclosed) whole to be thrown out of joint by the subject, nor was there a harmonious position for the subject to adopt.<sup>89</sup> Instead, the subject has been barred from the beginning and the only truth of the subject position is its traumatic lack. In Kantian terms, the teacher is rendered disturbed by virtue of its very being, and behind the layers of philosophical abstraction lie the terrifying emptiness that is the nothingness of the teacher his or herself.

### **Conclusion: A Negative Ontology of Teacher Reflection**

By destabilizing a teacher’s subjective framework of understanding, this text follows Žižek’s reading of Lacan through Hegel toward a determinate negation that attempts to open an emancipatory space for thinking. By “undermining the coordinates of the system from which it subtracts itself,”<sup>90</sup> Žižek’s formulation of subject consciousness creates an ontological space where a teacher’s awareness of their own condition stems from a malfunction in the subjective fantasy. Such a failure is the result of unintentional encounters with the Real that cause traumatic fissures in the teacher’s perception of self such that an authentic moment of reflection becomes possible. The reflexive self, within this negative ontological plane, is a violent analysis of the teacher’s own agency and constitutive lack. As a method of radical reflexivity, this movement brings the subjective condition into focus by creating the conditions to negate previously understood notions of self thereby becoming its opposite through the “annihilation and

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<sup>89</sup> Slavoj Žižek. *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996).

<sup>90</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008) 409.

retroactive restructuring of the presupposed contents.”<sup>91</sup> Ultimately, the re-formed teacher, as any form of autonomous being, can only come into existence within the spaces created by such a radical outburst of reflexive violence—the violence to impose a “new order on quotidian reality.”<sup>92</sup>

To reframe the preceding in Žižekian parlance, it was not until I realized *my precious treasure is shit* that I became able to look beyond the coordinates of my own subjective frame. The point to be gleaned here is relative to the necessity of my own subjective destitution. In Žižek’s description of Althusser’s autobiography *L’avenir Dure Longtemps*,<sup>93</sup> he notes that Althusser’s greatest fear was that others would become aware of his own non-existence. This fear, rather than being a point of avoidance for Žižek, is the critical movement of psychoanalysis demarcating the subject’s loss of anxiety about his/her own subjective position in the Real. That is to say, material reality outside myself definitely exists; the problem has always been that I myself do not exist.<sup>94</sup> However, by accepting one’s own destitution, the subject is able to relinquish the fetishization of the *objet a* or the belief in a hidden treasure that is responsible for her/his unique worth in society. In Lacanian terms, this is the intimate moment that conjoins madness and freedom,<sup>95</sup> when it is possible for the subject to become un-glued from a direct referential relationship. “The moment of decision is the moment of madness”<sup>96</sup> precisely in so far as that there is no big Other to provide the ultimate guarantee, the guarantee of an ontological cover for the subject’s decision.

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<sup>91</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 144.

<sup>92</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008) 175.

<sup>93</sup> Louis Althusser, *L’avenir Dure Longtemps; Suivi De, Les Faits*, French ed. (Paris: IMEC, 1992).

<sup>94</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Connections of the Freudian Field to Philosophy and Popular Culture,” *Lacan*.

<http://www.lacan.com/zizlacan3.htm>

<sup>95</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, Book XVII*, trans. Jacques Alain-Miller (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007) 258

<sup>96</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Da Capo Senza Fine,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, ed. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2000) 258.

To fully withdrawal the self into the void of the Real necessitates a final speculative turn toward Hegel. As a final short-circuiting of the teacher's ontological horizon, the Hegelian turn is an antagonistic wounding that allows for higher planes of consciousness through the violent confrontation of the subject with its own presuppositions and the final disavowal of the desire for wholeness.<sup>97</sup> This disavowal necessitates a reflexive break from comprehending teaching through a perspective codified by the illusionary fantasy of ontogenic (mis)recognition offered by a predefined pedagogical framework. Radical pedagogy is imaged here as an encounter with this dark side of the ontological edifice, a final act of teacher reflexivity that necessitates a confrontation with the terrifying imagery of Real, wherein I disengage from my own "radical pathology."<sup>98</sup> Methodologically, this reflexive endpoint is, for Žižek, a movement toward ontological failure whereby the abyss beyond emerges as a groundless nothingness out of which everything springs *ex nihilo*. Nothingness, in this sense, is a subversive transformation wherein the subject encounters the radical alienation of an asubjective opacity rather than her/his own self-image:

Reflection always fails [when] the subject ... encounters in a mirror some dark spot, a point which does not turn into his mirror-picture—in which he cannot "recognize himself." It is, however, precisely at this point of absolute strangeness ... that the subject is inscribed into the picture.<sup>99</sup>

Thus, the *subject qua the subject of the look* (reflection) is precisely the "inherently incomplete pathological stain"<sup>100</sup> from which the teacher is able to perceive itself against the chaos of its

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<sup>97</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>98</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000) 32.

<sup>99</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso 2008) 89.

<sup>100</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso 2008) 89.



own (mis)recognition. Ontologically, this is the moment the “true” Žižekian subject emerges because it is within this recognition that the “event” is doubled and the alienation of the Other becomes present.

Within the nothingness of shifting educative experience, the recognition of my teaching self as a *pathological stain* of ontological finitude exposed me to the ephemeral temporalities that triggered me to seize within the vortices, gaps, and voids in the fabric of reality. For Hegel, this is the *night of the world* where “the human being is the night, the empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of representations and images, of which none belong to him.”<sup>101</sup> What this means is that the fantasmatic phenomenon of “seeing one’s self seeing” as the disembodied “pure gaze” of ontogenetic experience collapses the fantasy frame into the abyss of radical negativity at the heart of the subject.<sup>102</sup> Radical negativity, as such, cannot be sublated into a stable social edifice. That is to say, it is a self-relating negativity that puts at risk and dissolves the social structure that supports both the finite status of the teacher subject and the ideal of the discourse of education.

Regardless of the depths our (mis)recognition, the Žižekian lens asserts that there always exists an indivisible remainder, or “bone in the throat,”<sup>103</sup> that resists symbolization. Radical pedagogy, as such, is centered on the teacher’s ability to understand and enunciate the conditions of his/her circumstances, allowing for far-reaching reconceptualizations of the problems and possibilities of educating. Therefore, teaching, like philosophy, “begins the moment we do not

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<sup>101</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 44.

<sup>102</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kiesłowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) 175.

<sup>103</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000) 28.

accept what exists as given.”<sup>104</sup> By metaphorically glimpsing into the spaces of betweenness that elude our ontic horizon, a negative ontology of teacher reflexivity highlights a way of thinking about education without prescribed answers, where answers can only ever be partial and may result in a violent *passage à l’acte*. Experiencing the excessive remainders of subjectivization allows interlopers to envisage displacements in the Real as a gap or shift between perspectives that “pulverizes sameness into [a] multitude of appearances.”<sup>105</sup> Within this multiplicity, pedagogical movements emerge within the gap separating objects in reality from the temporal simulacra. In this absence, it is possible to articulate a radicalized ontology of education by reformulating Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* to read, I think where the self is evacuated.

If educators are to take seriously the possibilities of this frame, we must not be so arrogant to presume an answer and offer a plan of action for others, but tarry with the negativity of our own ideological condition. The task, then, for all ‘radical’ educators is to begin looking awry at our own subjective condition, encountering the trauma of the Real again and again. It is through the trauma of our destitution that we can begin autonomously, inverting the current system of education into a state of negative universality, a universality of irreducible Symbolic inconsistency. As expressed through the linking of violent experiences and common antagonisms, not the neutral translations of postmodernity, the true radical position is not just the readiness to save ourselves or our students but also the “ruthless dedication to annihilating those who made the victims,”<sup>106</sup> even if this involves the thorough decimation of our own position.

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<sup>104</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 2.

<sup>105</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*. Short Circuits. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006) 26.

<sup>106</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on 11 September and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002) 68.

## CH 2- Reflexive Wounding: Teacher Reflection as an Act of Nothingness

### Introduction: Quiet Moments of Disruption

“...It is your privilege that allows you to sit around all day and think about this kind of postmodernist bullshit.”

This intentionally combative lucubrate was directed squarely at me following the first conference presentation in which I used Žižek’s philosophical corpus as my primary lens of analysis. The bon mot that drew the ire of my interlocutor—both a senior academic and fellow panelist—was my invocation of Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*: “I would prefer not to.” My refusal, a philosophical position familiar to readers of Žižek,<sup>1</sup> was, specifically related to a request by an audience member to articulate a possible solution to the economic and/or educational problems that plague many U.S. cities. Having spent a decade of my career teaching in a large U.S. city, my interlocutor was appalled by my “arrogance” and noted I was just another “wanna-be philosopher,” a “young intellectual sipping the postmodern kool-aid...who didn’t care about the causes I claim to resist.” Despite the relative distance of time since this moment, two pieces of our interaction have lingered with me during my early struggles in academia: (1) his implicit assertion that thinking itself is not an act and (2) his misinterpretation—despite his academic standing—of the philosophical foundations of my thesis.

I offer this brief narrative as a way a foregrounding how a narrow piece of Žižekian theory might add to teacher education; or, more broadly, the philosophy of teacher education. While much of this research is necessarily speculative in nature, this chapter seeks to engage the existing literature in the field—specifically around the notion of teacher reflection. By way of offering a rough scaffolding, I begin this process by offering a ‘loose’ literature review of the

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006) 383.

notions of reflection and reflexivity. I use the term ‘loose’ because, in keeping with the thematic structure of this research, I develop the notions in relation to my own understandings of the methods throughout my career (academic and professional). While this may be atypical, it more closely aligns with the larger goals of this research related to the understanding of subjective being and constructs of fantasy. The middle portion of this chapter offers a Žižekian response to this ‘standard’ formulation of teacher reflection. Rooted in Žižek’s reading of German Idealism, particularly Kant and Hegel, I consider a methodological movement beyond teacher reflection which I term here: *reflexive wounding*. The intent of the reflexive wound is to force teachers into disjunctive spaces where each individual teacher-subject is confronted with the lack of being that lurks at the centre of every shifting subjectivity. This truth of being is found in the trauma of reality itself (negative ontology) or the realization that there is no positive content, the subject can only be located in alienation and antagonism. From this position, it becomes possible to imagine the mind as always-already possessing the ability to disrupt its own function thereby generating a temporal space of subjective autonomy. Further, by recognizing a universal truth of alienation inherent to subjectivity itself, the teacher-subject is freed to connect with others (students, teachers, parents, etc.) and resist false and arbitrary Masters of truth—i.e. the discourse of education as the Lacanian big Other (Symbolic order).

Before proceeding, however, let me conclude my opening narrative by offering a manifestly Žižekian interpretation. At the root of our disagreement was the Leninist question: *What is to be Done?*—a pathology at the heart of the political and philosophical Left (a position to which both I and my colleague from this anecdote ascribe). I evoke the term pathology because (more than a question) the spectre of the ideal causes so many leftist educators, agitators, and would be conspirators to become lost in the rhetoric (of identity politics and so on),

demanding a frenetic output of pseudo-activity to avoid the public shaming of being labeled “one of them.” Like a car spinning its wheels in a ditch, we remain stuck in a kind of paralysis, but revel in the resulting permanent state of emergency. However, if we are to take seriously the possibility of the Žižekian frame, we must not be so arrogant as to presume an answer or offer a plan of action for others. As intellectuals today, what might happen if we were to take a step back and abstain from answering the Leninist question; instead, unashamedly, responding, “Fuck it! What do I know?” How might this allow us to open the space to resist the urge to act simply for the sake of doing something, a space where resisting the compulsion to act might mean disrupting the reproduction of the existing social order? According to Žižek, practicing nothingness is a means to act, as nothingness opens up the space for a different kind of activity.<sup>2</sup> The act of nothingness is not a hopeless predilection toward nihilism but a necessary presupposition for the emergence of an alternative order of things. Negativity, in this way, can be understood relationally to the negative ontology threading chapter one; the absolute negativity that always-already exists as the underbelly that structures the Symbolic order.

Such a negativity, from a strictly Lacanian perspective, is a necessary gesture of withdrawal that precedes any positive gesture of enthusiastic identification with a cause. Negativity functions as the condition of (im)possibility allowing for truly uninhibited, fervent identification—that is to say, it lays the ground, “opens up the space for it, but is simultaneously obfuscated by it and undermines it”<sup>3</sup> As educators, academics, and intellectuals at this point in history, our duty is to open up our field of research to questioning and at the same time undermine the field itself. The explicit absence of a plan, according to Žižek, is Brechtian in

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<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 2000) 154.

ideal: “[T]hinking always proceeds acting... acting without thinking is an impotent act.”<sup>4</sup> Thinking is the formulation of an empty gesture; a gesture through which the space opens for people to not only “realize their old emancipatory dreams... [but] reinvent their very modes of dreaming.”<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the discomfort of this position, the chaos and possibility of unknowing are preferable to the wretched despondency and false freedom our present system affords us. Or, to quote one of Žižek’s favorite passages from Mao Zedong: “[T]here is great disorder under heaven [and] the situation is excellent.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Teacher Reflection: Reflecting on Teaching**

It is from, and within, this space that I began to reflect on my own teaching and how I engage in the act of thinking. The most overt and constant representation of this thinking has been, of course, the act (method) of teacher reflection. Beginning with my Social Studies methods courses, the value/necessity of reflection was vehemently instilled in me by my professor—a former Marine who was intrigued by my septum ring and Russian history minor. According to Dr. Byford, reflection offered us (pre-service teachers) an opportunity to evaluate, refine, articulate, and engage our teaching practice while constantly re-evaluating our teaching philosophies.<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, during my first few years as a teacher, my reflective practices were lacking at best. Day-to-day survival became imperative and the act of reflecting was reduced to a series of post-it notes haphazardly placed around my desk describing how I believed I could be a less shitty teacher tomorrow.

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<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, Communism, A New Beginning: Day 1, “*Verso*,” Accessed September 01, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYzTDz7EjzY>

<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek & Mao Zedong, *On Practice and Contradiction* (London: Verso, 2007) 24.

<sup>6</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010) xii.

<sup>7</sup> Information taken from my undergraduate Social Studies methods notes.

As I read educational scholarship now, I am frequently baffled by the number of articles describing the “theory-practice gap.” But, if I pause for a moment, theory was of little importance to me early in my career. Thus, the presence of such a gap was simply not a reality for me as a young teacher. However, as I have advanced through my career the intersections of theory and practice have taken on new meanings. Perplexingly, I had been reading dense (continental) philosophy since I was a teenager but struggled as a reader of educational philosophy and/or theory. As a result of my comfort with similar philosophical texts, I began to view my difficulties not as a question of understanding but in terms of transference into application. Even now, I vividly remember my first encounter with Nel Nodding’s *Philosophy of Education*,<sup>8</sup> how I underlined far too many passages (an affliction that lingers to this day) while I imagined how I would begin reconstructing my classroom. But the next morning when I arrived at the main office, a sub duty was waiting for me. My frenzied will toward change was deterred by the daily rigors of the bureaucratic apparatus and by the time my students arrived Nodding’s work seemed like a veiled memory of a moment long forgotten. Over the course of my career, I came to realize bridging the gap from intellectual understanding to the practical application of a theory while simultaneously managing a classroom was much more difficult than I had expected. As an issue of learning, one of the great ironies, of course, is that this struggle (i.e. alienation) is experienced every day by our students—but I wonder how often teachers pause for a moment and listen to students’ narrative. Over time, I found reflection was the most productive means of bridging the gaps between philosophical foundations and the daily realities of my teaching. In these quiet moments of disruption, I was able to start, stop, and rewind the narrative, allowing me the space to make (more) practical connections.

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<sup>8</sup> Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

According to Day, Pope, and Denicolo, a large percentage of teacher thinking is tacit, a knowledge that exists through experience that is rarely articulated.<sup>9</sup> Considering this notion, the method of teacher reflection would seem to function as an invaluable tool to articulate these tacit understandings or what Wagner terms “knots in thinking”—the subjective and intellectual experiences of conflict that impact teachers’ professional practice.<sup>10</sup> The problem with this notion, however, is that we yet again (often) encounter a theory-practice gap but in ways that are decidedly more convoluted. In this instance, we might say that teachers encounter the opposite side of the same coin; but instead of encountering the abstract temporality of theory, teachers’ face the bureaucratic concreteness of the educational apparatus. For example, when emanating from the mouths of school administrators, reflection has most often been presented to me as a prescriptive tool linking ‘best practice’ to a box on my daily/weekly lessons plans. Under such conditions, the method is a means of demonstrating ‘effective’ teaching practice as measured against a broad range of rubrics and standards. But the same method, as it is described by theorists and qualitative researchers, is intended as an examination of one’s (un)known values and beliefs—revealed through complex tapestries of data such as (but not limited to) personal narratives, journal writing, action research, and (auto)ethnographies. Admittedly, as I am now in the midst of my second decade of teaching, my reflections often spiral so far down the philosophical rabbit hole that I frequently lose perspective on how any of what I have reflected on might apply to the daily reality of my classroom.

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Day, Maureen L. Pope, and Pam Denicolo, *Insights into Teachers' Thinking and Practice* (London: Falmer Press, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Angelika Wagner, “Conflicts in Consciousness: Imperative Cognitions can Lead to Knots in Thinking,” in *Teacher Thinking: A New Perspective on (persistent problems in) Education*, ed. Rob Halkes & John Olson (Heirwig, Holland: Swets Publishing Service, 1984).



## What is Teacher Reflection Anyway?

Realizing the potentiality of the method but facing the apparent hope/helplessness of its usage, I have, at various moments throughout my career, engaged in extensive literature reviews on the topic. As a philosophical starting point, Dewey's work on how educators think provides a useful anchor for an examination of the concept and method of teacher reflection. For Dewey, reflective thinking was a cognitive process of discovering where a problem originated followed by an intentional act of searching to resolve the difficulty.<sup>11</sup> As a veteran teacher, if I were asked to define teacher reflection on a post-it note as a part of a larger professional development activity, it would be something akin to Dewey's definition. In fact, when I 'Google' "teacher reflection definition" an amalgamation of what the search index returns might read as the following: *a systematic inquiry into a teacher's own practice*. It should be noted, however, that Dewey's vision of teacher inquiry was not a prescriptive skill. Instead, inquiry and reflection were meant to develop a teacher's mind-set whereby the individual would constantly question their own assumptions and uncover various aspects of who they are as practitioners.

Perhaps because of my familiarity with the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, I was unaware that modern notions of teacher reflection emanated from Dewey; instead, my understanding of the method was rooted in the work of the theorists Max Van Manen and Donald Schön—both of whom were influenced by Habermas' *domains of knowledge*. According to Habermas, knowledge is gained through reflection such that reflection leads to transformed consciousness or a transformation in the individual's perspective.<sup>12</sup> Habermasian models, such as

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<sup>11</sup> John Dewey, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (New York: Heath and Co., 1933).

<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1971).

Schön's reflection as critical inquiry,<sup>13</sup> developed a reflective practice meant to deal directly with critique and social interpretation. By extending the boundaries of reflective practice, Van Manen's formulation placed an increased emphasis on critical understanding and a tripartite differentiation of location:

*Technical rationality* – empirical reflection on how to best obtain an education and thereby administer its instruction;

*Hermeneutic phenomenology* – examines the interpretive assumptions a teacher makes within the context of their daily reality;

*Critical reflection* – analysis of the ethical and political dimension of educational goals as a potential means for consensus about its ends.<sup>14</sup>

Both Van Manen and Schön attempt to anticipate the constant tension between teacher reflection, interpretation, and its application thereby placing a particular emphasis on the examination of the unknown during the reflection process. According to Schön, the development of an “epistemology of practice”<sup>15</sup> makes explicit the tacit processes of thinking which accompany doing. As a result, Schön's reflective method forces the teacher to constantly interact with and modify their practice such that learning consistently takes place. On the surface, both Schön's and Van Manen's descriptions are akin to the theoretical enunciations I described at the outset. Yet, the concepts of hermeneutic phenomenology and an epistemology of practice appear to provide a reflexive space to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Extending these notions, or perhaps viewing reflection from a shifted perspective, the notion of critical reflection itself would become—and remains presently—an area of great

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<sup>13</sup> Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Max van Manen, “Linking Ways of Knowing with Ways of Being Practical,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 6, no. 3 (1977) 205.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) 49.

emphasis in qualitative research. According to Norman Denzin,<sup>16</sup> critical reflection necessitates an emphasis on the sociocultural privilege and/or lack of privilege that the researcher carries into the field as a foundational factor influencing their performance. In *Searching for Yellowstone: Race, Gender, Family, and Memory in the Postmodern West*, Denzin goes on to examine critical reflexivity as method for problematizing popular representations and scholarly discourses in the creation of new versions of the past. Here, critical reflection—turned reflexivity—becomes a tool for examining how personal experiences collide with hegemonic discourses and histories putting bodies in motion toward the creation of both subjective and cultural memories. As a teacher, this means one must be attentive to their own daily practices and how sociocultural and historical structures have shaped their situatedness over time and space. Succinctly, Tony Adams and Stacey Holdman-Jones note, “critical reflexivity is the labor [reflection] will perform upon itself.”<sup>17</sup> The critical lens, as such, necessitates the teacher being personally accountable for their own situatedness in systems of power and privilege.

To highlight any specific theoretical lens of interpretation within this movement risks the continuation of the hegemony each seeks to resist. Acknowledging this, I believe it would imprudent and insincere to fail to acknowledge the tremendous impact Critical Race Theory, Feminism, and Queer Theory have had on the development of this research. While each lens of resistance may not be present in this current embodiment, I would not have arrived at this destination without these narrative frames and the extraordinary research being conducted in these fields. As a way of proceeding, it is important to highlight two major shifts that become increasingly present within these frames: (1) the increased usage of term subject and/or

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<sup>16</sup> Norman Denzin, *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003)

<sup>17</sup> Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman Jones, “Telling Stories: Reflexivity, Queer Theory, and Autoethnography,” *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies* 11, no. 2 (2011) 108.

subjective experience and (2) the transition from the term reflection to reflexivity. Shifts in the usage of each of these concepts have led to major deviations in research surrounding the potentiality of the reflective method. In the following section, I will document the difference between the terms reflection and reflexivity, briefly describe how reflexivity has impacted the field, and begin to construct a Žižekian response to the ideas of reflection and reflexivity.

### **Reflection and Reflexivity: Is there a Difference?**

To briefly reiterate the preceding, teacher *reflection* is a systematic inquiry into one's own teaching practice. The term *reflexivity* differs from reflection in its bi-directional linking of both internalizing and externalizing (e.g. structure and agency) factors that are both prospective and retrospective.<sup>18</sup> Within the terrain of teacher education, reflection is most often framed as an act of looking backward to assess or struggle to understand a failed part of our teaching or an elusive portion of our subjective self. In short, teacher reflection describes a process of backward or inward contemplation on one's teaching or what it means to be a teacher. While reflection and reflexivity are often—mistakenly—used to describe nearly identical methodological processes, this characterization is more closely in line with the process of reflection not reflexivity.

In a recent guide on learning developed for teachers, the authors avoid the conflation of the two terms (reflection and reflexivity) by defining reflection as “thinking with a purpose” and reflexivity as “an awareness of personal involvement in meaning construction.”<sup>19</sup> Throughout this research, the primary focus of my analysis can thus be identified as teacher reflexivity rather than teacher reflection; in particular, the movement from personal, to epistemological, and

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<sup>18</sup> Julian Edge, *The Reflexive Teacher Educator in TESOL: Roots and Wings* (Taylor and Francis, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Anne Jordan, Orison Carlie, and Annetta Stack, *Approaches to Learning: A Guide for Teachers* (Berkshire: Open University Press, 2008) 247.

ultimately ontological reflexivity. For Carla Willig reflexivity involves a particular self-awareness that must be understood in one of two pathways:

*Personal reflexivity* involves reflecting upon the way in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped [us].

*Epistemological reflexivity* encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) we have made in the course of our [examination], and it helps us to think about the implication of such assumptions.<sup>20</sup>

Reflexivity, as such, is a heightened level of self-awareness gained through the recognition that a teacher's understanding cannot be developed apart from their own knowledge of self, identity, and position in the world. This process of meaning making is the basis for the "reflective project of the self;"<sup>21</sup> a reflexively organized description of self-identity. Such understandings of reflexivity involve a highly conscious monitoring and adjustment to given social conventions in an attempt to construct a coherent narrative—even if it is only on a transitory basis.

This increasingly complex definition of personal understanding creates shifts in a teacher's epistemological reflexivity and opens the possibility for substantive growth in their epistemic knowing. Reflexivity, at this juncture, however, remains marred in the circularity of epistemological issues such that any theory of knowledge presupposes knowledge of the conditions in which knowing takes place. Pierre Bourdieu, pushes this notion of the epistemological calling for examinations of epistemic reflexivity as systemic forms of reflection aimed at making the unconscious conscious and the tacit explicit.<sup>22</sup> With this in mind,

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<sup>20</sup> Carla Willig, *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* (New York: Open University Press, 2013) 375.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

Bourdieu's reflexive approach is intended as a theoretical approach/methodology to address the problems that concern the nature of knowledge; or, in this context, the difficulties teachers have in grasping the ways in which our understanding (i.e. knowledge itself) is itself socially and historically situated. But it is on this notion that we arrive at an interesting tension in the philosophy of education. This tension centers on the split between epistemology and ontology or how do we go about knowing things (epistemology) and what is the nature of existence (ontology).

Throughout my research, I found research situated around the notion of teacher practitioners and/or teacher education often remained located within the domain of epistemology. Even when the word reflexivity was evoked, descriptions were rooted in concerns about the nature of knowledge. According to Joe Kincheloe, teacher ontology itself is often framed through a lens of knowing concerned with "the way teachers come to see themselves as educators" and "how they develop their teacher persona."<sup>23</sup> By collapsing the ontological into the domain of knowing, questions of being are translated into frames of critical inquiry and then written back into the texture of epistemological knowing through references to the nature of teachers' knowledge. This knowledge then becomes an amalgam of what a teacher claims to know about his/her self, the world, and other claims s/he must justify against or within the current educational paradigm.

Kincheloe identifies this as a primary reason why mainstream teacher education programs are relatively uninterested in questions of ontology.<sup>24</sup> As an example of how this frame presents itself, if pre-service teachers are being prepared for the rigors of a systemic model of

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<sup>23</sup> Joe Kincheloe, "What You Don't Know is Hurting You and the Country," in *What You Don't Know about Schools*, ed. Joe Kincheloe & Shirley Steinberg (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 24.

<sup>24</sup> Joe L. Kincheloe, "Postformalism and Critical Multiculturalism: Educational Psychology and the Power of Multilogicality," *The Praegar Handbook of Education and Psychology*, ed. L. Kincheloe and Raymond A. Horn Jr. (Wesport, CN: Praegar, 2012) 876.

standardized school(ing)—officially mandated and scripted curriculum, uniform perspectives, institutionalized standards and assessments, etc.—then teacher education programs would logically place a high emphasis on what can be known within this system. This, of course, does not factor in other structural interests that might impact a university’s decision—for example, neoliberal interests. Kincheloe’s framing gives credence to the reality I have witnessed and experienced first-hand in K-12 schools for years. Many teachers, including myself, identify feeling an unrelenting pressure to meet the output demands of standards-based curriculum and assessment, respond to constantly shifting pedagogical and curricular expectations, and a carnivalesque environment predicated on the whims of administrators. The collateral impact of this environment is the creation of a system where teachers believe they lack the time and space for reflexive inquiry in their classrooms.

But in my own quiet moments of reflection, I have wondered if philosophical or ontological inquiry is genuinely lacking or if its looks and feels different than how I might expect? If, for example, we strictly constrain reflexivity to the domain of the ontological, reflexivity about the nature of being opens a pathway to examining the foundational nature of neoliberal society itself. The risk, in this scenario, is that the teacher-practitioner/researcher loses all semblance of the epistemological and how teachers/teaching relates to the daily contexts of knowing. In less abstract terms, when reflexivity is applied to approaches that put into question what teachers’ take for granted (i.e. critical theory/reflection), the dilemma often becomes strictly an ontological matter, concerned with the best way to understand the nature of the concept. As a method of teacher inquiry, much of the initial epistemological concern with problematizing how the teacher makes sense of the concept is lost for the sake of developing the best theory of the concept itself. As such, it becomes increasingly less clear what reflexivity was

doing in relation to the teacher and the positivity of the method is lost in the abstractness of the theoretical implications.

For Deborah Britzman, however, these tensions provide the very spaces we seek for self-discovery by keeping open reflexivity as such in relation to the teacher. What happens, for example, when teachers reflect on problems associated with their own narration of experience and understandings of reality while asking what conditions or structures drive the narrative impulse? For Britzman, reflexive inquiry implicates teachers in their own narratives causing psychic conflicts that provide greater insight into the unconscious and highlighting the philosophical, pedagogical, and ideological tensions that are always present within a teacher.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, by highlighting the shifting nature of identity and the subject's attempt to construct an(y) consistent reality, Anthony Giddens theorizes about how we might imagine reflexive shifts toward the realm of the ontological.<sup>26</sup> As an example, if reflexive epistemology is what it means for a teacher to know her/his subjective identity, then the ontological horizon might be imagined as how this knowing is bent back upon itself to consider the primordial question of being.

Bettie St. Pierre and Patti Lather, under the broad rubric of the 'posts' (poststructuralism/postmodernism), push this questioning further by considering what it might mean for a research process to always-already be in the process of becoming. 'Post-qualitative research,' as such, pushes and problematizes the ontological limits of being in a way that is similar to Donald Judd's postmodernist description of sculpture, "a gesture toward thinking of the new where there hasn't been enough time and work to see the limits but it is a space to move into where its

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<sup>25</sup> Deborah P. Britzman, *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach*, SUNY Series, Teacher Empowerment and School Reform (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).



characteristics are bound to develop.”<sup>27</sup> By continuing to follow St. Pierre and Lather, what spaces might I find myself in as a teacher when the intent of the research itself is “to produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently.”<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the task of research ceases to be providing answers and instead becomes the ability to demonstrate how the way problems are perceived is itself part of the problem. How then do I situate my-self as a teacher within a method where the shifting terrain is precisely the point and the problem?

### **A Žižekian Lens of Reflexivity**

In *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Žižek provides a framework for conceptualizing alternative pathways of reflexive thinking. This methodological movement of thinking otherwise has its foundation in Žižek’s exploration of the Hegelian relationship between understanding and reason(ing)—a relationship that uncovers a conflict inherent to the logic of reason itself. Rather than serving as reflexive blockage, this tension—between what G.W. F. Hegel terms the madness of reason and its inverse the excess of unreason—is a constitutive means of problematizing our very subjectivity. This interpretation runs counter to standard interpretations of Hegel wherein the Hegelian dialectic culminates in a rationalistic moment or a harmonious synthesis free from contradiction. According to this standard interpretation, the goal of any reflexive method would be a movement toward this synthesis. In terms of teacher reflection, we might think of this standard interpretation as resulting in a moment of subjective wholeness whereby the teacher arrives at an understanding (of the self and her/his conditions of existence) that is free from conflict (contradiction).

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<sup>27</sup> Patti Lather, “To Give Good Science: Doing Qualitative Research in the Afterward,” *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22 no. 10 (2014), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, Methodology in the Fold and the Irruption of Transgressive Data,” *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 10 no. 2 (1997), 175.

Instead, Žižek's reading of Hegel counters this interpretation by holding that reason is itself the locus of conflict and rationality is the fundamental antagonism. Methodologically, this terrain is not entirely dissimilar to St. Pierre and Lather's formulation in that this position forces me as a teacher-subject to confront the potential falsity of all phenomena and appearances— i.e. the failure of the reflexive method is inherent to the inner-narrative and perception itself. But, as a re-formulation of the reflexive process, the Žižekian lens forces the teacher-subject to consider her/his own subjective fallibility while maintaining the primacy of the subject itself. The burden this places on the teacher, for example, is in overcoming my own understanding in relation to things, conditions, and perceptions while, simultaneously collapsing the subjective frame (qua methodological narrative). While the intent—and ultimate cost—of Žižek's proposal is abject destitution, what emerges is a new ontological horizon of possibility as a teacher.

In placing a special emphasis on Žižek's reading of German Idealism through Lacanian theory as a broad framework, the remainder of this text develops a reading of teacher reflexivity meant to disrupt all notions or possibilities of locating a consistent subject or moment of harmonious synthesis (i.e. subjective wholeness, or non-contradiction) through the methodological process. It is through the development of a contested view of teacher subjectivity or the negative *a priori* position of lack that the Žižekian lens begins to deviate from the preceding frameworks by postulating that all subjective understandings of identity are *fantasies*— or mythical points around which teacher identities evolve. Teacher identity, as such, is imagined here as both false—as it might be imagined in Marxist terms of false consciousness—and a gap in being that is positivized through the actions of the teacher-subject. To explicate the function of this fantasmatic structure, when a teacher identifies with a particular ideology, for example, with critical pedagogy, the lack (or gap in being) in the teacher-subject's identity is filled in by a

performative dimension signaled from the ideology itself—i.e. the Symbolic big Other. In this movement, the teacher's identification with the ideology itself, retroactively creates the illusion that her/his identification with the characteristics of that ideology were always-already there; thus, preventing any recognition of the lack or gap in being. In other words, s/he “automatically overlooks the fact that this very formal act of recognition creates the content one recognizes oneself in.”<sup>29</sup>

It is against this point of misrecognition that Žižek clarifies how Lacanian theory disrupts postmodern relativism by reinvigorating the concept of universality. For Lacan, the universal truth of any situation is revealed through contingency. According to Žižek, “Lacan accepts the ‘deconstructionist’ motif of radical contingency, but turns this motif against itself, using it to assert his commitment to the Truth as contingent.”<sup>30</sup> In *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek indicates that postmodern relativism is self-referentially inconsistent insofar as it implicitly offers a synoptic view of the Whole while it explicitly denies the possibility of any synoptic view of the Whole as such.<sup>31</sup> By making thematic the negativity inherent to both German Idealism (Kant and Hegel) and psychoanalytic theory (Lacan), Žižek seeks to formulate an account of universal T/truth that avoids this failure. The Žižekian lens, to this end, offers a new methodological approach that hinges on the insight that any totality (or Whole) is always internally inconsistent but this inconsistency is the universal Truth of alienation.

In order to fully understand Žižek's development of this position and its possibility as a philosophical frame for teacher reflection, the remainder of this chapter focuses on Žižek's

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<sup>29</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 73.

<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

interpretation of the philosophical period known as *German Idealism*—both in-itself and through Lacanian theory. In addition, to provide greater clarity, each sub-section includes examinations of individual pieces of philosophical inquiry and its implication for the act of teacher reflection. By way of outlining the proceeding, this examination proceeds through the following order of inquiry:

- (a) the Kantian transcendental turn and the fundamental nature of knowledge and reality,
- (b) Hegel's dialectics and the asymmetry of the Hegelian subject, and
- (c) Žižek's subjective destitution and destitution as a zero level of reflexive understanding.

As a connective thread, I consider the individual and convergent impact of these theories as various theoretical states and subjective positions of negativity that uncover the true (Lacanian Real) nature of the subject. Finally, I consider Žižek's reading of the Hegelian wound as means of (re)invigorating the act of teacher reflection qua subjective reflexivity.

### **Kant's Transcendental Turn**

According to Žižek, Immanuel Kant's *transcendental turn* is the epochal event in modern philosophy. Žižek describes Kant's revelation in the following terms:

The world is not simply the universe or everything that exists... understanding what the world is means, in transcendental terms, understanding some pre-existing, at least historically, a priori structure which determines how we understand how the world is disclosed to us.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2004) 25.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant frames this idea noting that “knowledge begins with experience”<sup>33</sup> and that transcendental knowledge is “not so much occupied with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible a priori.”<sup>34</sup> In terms of teacher reflection, this means that experience is possible because of the teacher’s senses; what we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste, according to Kant, is where knowledge begins. But as the prior definition notes, knowledge is also *a priori* and the transcendental can be taken to mean that which comes before experience. Thus, by following Kant, it is necessary to understand that my view of the world as a teacher is mediated and that reality itself can never be directly accessed. In this first philosophical movement, Kant provides us with the framework for grappling with the fundamental nature of knowledge and reality. In essence, as we reflect on anything as teachers, we must ask ourselves, how do we know or understand the nature of our reality, let alone the nature of our reflection?

Žižek extends this question by attributing to Kant’s transcendental turn, the detection of a “crack in the ontological edifice of reality.”<sup>35</sup> What Žižek is highlighting in particular is Kant’s division of reality into two distinct orders—*phenomena* and *noumena*—and the consequent differences between things in themselves and things as they appear to us. In reflexive terms, a teacher’s senses provide them with something (some knowledge) about the world outside of her/himself. This knowledge, however, does not mean that what s/he intuits is a real and unqualified awareness of whatever it is (the thing-in-itself) that causes the teacher’s senses to experience something in the first place. Rather, by transforming what a teacher intuits into the knowable physical world of appearances and combining these appearances with our concepts of

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<sup>33</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Howard Caygill, Gary Banham, and Norman Kemp Smith, rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 41.

<sup>34</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Howard Caygill, Gary Banham, and Norman Kemp Smith, rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 59.

<sup>35</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999) 55.

understanding, Kant identified the order reality called the *phenomenal*. Phenomenal reality, as such, is comprised of appearances or a teacher-subject's concepts of understanding in the form of thoughts that Kant calls *categories* without which the world would be unintelligible. Such categories, examples of which are the concepts about which knowledge is believed to exist *a priori*, possessed for Kant, a truth that is presupposed.<sup>36</sup> These categories of thought are not generated through processes of abstraction based on subjective experience but spontaneously by the teacher-subject's understanding. In this way, they do not mirror the true nature of an object but insist upon the subject's consciousness as what can be counted as an object.

Objects, as a consequence, can only be known to teachers through the way they appear in accordance with her/his subjective forms of thought—they cannot be known in themselves. But given that teachers are able to think of the idea of things-in-themselves (though not through our senses), Kant thought it was reasonable to give a name to such a concept. Kant's term for this is *noumena*, the plural form of noumenon. Noumenal reality refers to things-in-themselves about which the teacher-subject can think but never truly know. Noumena, in this way, are presumed things-in-themselves (Kant's *das Ding an sich*),<sup>37</sup> or objects (/events) which constitute what we perceive as reality but exist independently of human senses. In terms of traditional forms of teacher reflection, the Kantian division of reality can be seen as identifying a disconnect in the relationship between thought and reality—i.e. a teacher's conceptualization or perception of reality (phenomenal) and a 'real' (or noumenal) reality.

The logic of Kant's unknowableness of being is thus the first state of subjective negativity. This negativity is both an *epistemological* obstacle as the 'unknowableness' of the

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<sup>36</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>37</sup> Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

subject is a reference to the split subjectivity of the teacher-subject qua thing-in-itself and *ontological* as the Thing (-in-itself) can only be located in the Real (noumenal). In other words, the teacher-subject and object of reflection are inherently ‘mediated’ so that any ‘epistemological’ shift in the teacher’s point of view always reflects an ‘ontological’ shift in the object itself. The teacher’s unknowing, as such, is framed as the way all understanding is an ontological misperception of the subject qua being—or, the (in)ability to grapple with what the subject ‘is.’ Kant’s identification of the subject as dialectically split (or void) is a representation of the thinking subject (as a response to Descartes outlined below) that implies the subjective enunciation “I think” is always empty on the phenomenal level.<sup>38</sup> For Žižek, Kant anticipates Lacan my beginning to formulate the dislocation of subject from the Real and the failure of the Symbolic universe of representations: “there is no way for us to imagine in any consistent way the universe as a Whole; that is, as soon as we do it, we obtain two antinomical, mutually exclusive versions of the universe as a Whole.”<sup>39</sup>

The implications of this, as a teacher practitioner are such that any object of my reflection, including my-self, cannot mirror the true nature of that object. Instead, that object can only appear in accordance with my thoughts—i.e. the object cannot be known in-itself. The reflexive trap to be avoided, however, is imaging the world I experience in the everyday context of my classroom as some kind of illusion or some inferior version of what is really ‘real.’ Rather, Kant’s point is that what I experience as my daily reality as a teacher is necessarily based on what appears to me and appearances—as appearances-in-themselves—can only be located in me and not in the thing-itself. In this way, Kant’s reading of unknowing is far more radical than

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<sup>38</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 83.

standard Marxist formulations of false consciousness whereby (un)knowing is a problem of ideology—they do not know what they do but still they do it. Instead, following Kant, knowledge for teachers—as infinite human beings—is limited to the way things appears to us in phenomenal reality and what a thing is in-and-of-itself remains inaccessible. But this limitation simultaneously provides the context for thinking of the difference between my-self as dialectically split object and what a thing is in-and-of-itself. On this condition, Kant provides to the study of teacher reflection an awareness of a subjective space of betweenness, a paradoxical gap between what is experienced and the one doing the experiencing.

### **In Defense of Cogito**

Before proceeding to G.W.F. Hegel’s radicalization of Kant, it is important to explain how Kant advances Descartes formulation of *cogito* and, for Žižek, provides the basic foundation for the defense of the subject. This is of particular importance when this research is read in parallel to, or against, post-qualitative research (see St. Pierre and Lather) or Lacanian theorists (such as Britzman) who have and continue produce meaningful research on narrative inquiry and self-reflexivity. While much of this research may read with a similar tone and possess similar philosophical threads, this research defers in its continued attachment to the subject of, and beyond, the *cogito*. Although, when St. Pierre and Pillow speak of “working the ruins” of qualitative research to open up new planes of thinking (i.e. post-qualitative research) beyond the *cogito*, I often wonder if we are using different terms and philosophical trajectories to describe strikingly similar narrative landscapes. According to Žižek, however, “a spectre is haunting western academia; the spectre of the Cartesian subject. All academic powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre... the postmodern deconstructionists [for example]...for



whom the Cartesian subject is a discursive fiction, an effect of decentered textual mechanisms.”<sup>40</sup> The Žižekian lens, as such, is a response to philosophical positions that attempt to subvert notions of universality and subjectivity. In particular, postmodern and poststructuralist formulations that attempt to locate being in a specular image of fluidity—often following the narrative slippages<sup>41</sup> of Derrida’s deconstruction<sup>42</sup> and Deleuze and Guattari’s “BwO: Bodies without Organs.”<sup>43</sup> Instead, this approach to teacher reflection and reflexivity is a defense of the ‘teacher as subject’ that locates truth in the subject as *a priori alienation*.

This enunciation of *cogito* beyond Descartes begins with Kant’s transcendental turn providing a horizon of intelligibility within which the subjective being exists *and* is irresolvedly divided—i.e. reality is both noumenal and phenomenal. Kant’s formulation, according to Žižek, works to undermine the idea that the “I think” of Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am)<sup>44</sup> constitutes the subject as a substantial self:

Through this I or he or it (the Thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of the thoughts = X. It is known only through the thoughts which are its predicates, and of it, apart from them, we cannot have any concept whatsoever...<sup>45</sup>

Thus, by distinguishing between phenomena (things for us) and noumena (things in themselves), Kant is the first to articulate the paradox of Cartesian subject as *res cogitans* (thinking thing).

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<sup>40</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 1.

<sup>41</sup> Patrick O’Donnell, *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narratives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1st American ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

<sup>43</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

<sup>44</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings* (London: Penguin, [1641] 1998).

<sup>45</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 15.

That is to say, Kant shows that the subject cannot be located within any hierarchical system nor as the element of some Whole in which everything has its natural place. In such terms, Kant, for Žižek, anticipates Lacan insofar as the subject is *lack* (i.e. constitutively lacking its own place in the Symbolic)—as is designated by the Lacanian mathem  $\$$ , the ‘barred S.’<sup>46</sup>

The distinction between the “I” as Cartesian thinking substance and the “I” as Kantian transcendental appreciation is captured in the following logical failure. “I think” cannot be legitimized as a complete phrase because it calls for a continuation—“I think that...(the student was wrong, the test was easy, we are treated unfairly).” This distinction (between the “I” and “I think that...” ) exposes Descartes reification of consciousness: “he wrongly concludes that, in the empty ‘I think’ which accompanies every representation of an object, we get hold of a positive entity, ... which thinks and is transparent to itself in its capacity to think.”<sup>47</sup> In short, Kant’s revelation (beyond Descartes) is uncovering the asymmetry between the unknowable substance which thinks and the empty form “I think”—this position of negativity locates the subject (as *cogito*) in a position of *a priori* alienation.

### **The Subject as such...**

As noted previously, Kant provides a framework for understanding the topological discord within the teacher-subject her/himself and the notion that the mere existence of thoughts in our consciousness does not imply that I have access to myself as a thinking substance. Thus, while Kant anticipates a split (negative) subjectivity, he fails to overcome this split because any notion of freedom or autonomous state of being would require direct access to noumenal reality—

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<sup>46</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 12.

<sup>47</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 13.

i.e. the Thing-in-itself. From this position, we arrive at a fundamental question (problem) of philosophy—related to the Kantian split—how is it that at one moment the subject can be immersed in nature (objects/objectivity) and in the next moment we are speaking subjects supported by culture—able to adopt subjective attitudes about our surrounding world (subjectivity)? Broadly, this is the philosophical question of *transformation*.

For Žižek, the missing link between nature and culture is explicated, not in Kant, but something missed in Descartes. What Žižek highlights is Descartes' personal withdraw away from society in which he severed all links with the social world as a process of self-reflection. Žižek calls this process of *Cartesian doubt* or skepticism a mad gesture of withdraw into the self in which Descartes removed all Symbolic dimensions of his personal identity until all that remained was the *cogito*. In this way, Descartes' isolation of the *cogito* anticipates the negativity of the subject in German Idealism and the split subject (\$) in Lacanian theory. Standard interpretations of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I exist), as a consequence, miss the negativity implicit to Descartes' project of radical doubt. By reinterpreting Cartesian subjectivity in terms of this radical doubt, the Žižekian lens frames the teacher-subject not as a positively existing thing, but in the familiar terms of a kind of split subjectivity that lacks symmetry. The teacher-subject as such is only unified or whole insofar as both the teacher and Symbolic reality are split by the Lacanian Real.<sup>48</sup> It is in this moment of total withdraw that Žižek locates the passage from nature to culture as a gesture of madness.

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<sup>48</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

This madness, for Žižek, is best characterized in a passage from Hegel's *Jenaer Realphilosophie*,<sup>49</sup> where Hegel characterizes the subject's experience of pure Self qua abstract negativity:

This night, the inner of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head – there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful.<sup>50</sup>

In Žižekian terms, the 'night of world' is the kernel of subjectivity that is the moment of the contraction-into-self of the subject, the radical dimension of subjectivity that is *cogito and madness*. What Žižek seeks to highlight is that it is only when reality itself is eclipsed by this 'night of the world', that the subject is able to experience the world (i.e. reality) as nothing but loss—as an absolute negativity where it becomes possible to (re)construct the Symbolically mediated universe—i.e. transform the nature of subjectivity itself. On this point, I would note that when the subject experiences this state of negativity and nothingness it becomes reflexively necessary—not only possible—to (re)construct the Symbolic self; a point I will exemplify in both chapter three and, more poignantly, in chapter four. Descartes withdraw-into-self as methodic doubt is the experience of this negativity which reifies, not the substantial 'I' of the individual, but an empty point of negativity. This empty point of negativity is not nothing or no-thing but the opposite of everything, the Hegelian negation of all determinacy. And it is exactly here, in the empty void, that Žižek locates the subject. Thus, it is in the movement from Kant to Hegel, that

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<sup>49</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Jena System, 1804-5: Logic and Metaphysics* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986).

<sup>50</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999) 30.

the teacher gains access to her/his subjective self free from illusion, if only momentarily, and is able to (re)construct a self-identity without the constraints of the (big Other) Symbolic register.

### **Signifiers, Absentials, and the Power of Zero**

We can imagine this void and the subjective state of negativity as the opening of a reflexive space for subjective transformation. If there were no gap between a thing (object) and its representation (word—as object in the world), the two would appear to be identical and there would be no room for the emergence of a transformative subjectivity. In *The Function and the Field of Speech and Language*, Lacan expresses this movement in reference to the Hegelian phenomenological ideal (relating to phenomena as distinct from that of the nature of being and consciousness of objects of direct experience) noting that words can only exist if we first “murder” the thing. Specifically, Lacan notes:

the word is a death, a murder of a thing: as soon as the reality is symbolized, caught in a symbolic network, the thing itself is more present in a word, in its concept, than in its immediate physical reality. More precisely, we cannot return to the immediate reality: even if we turn from the word to the thing - from the word 'table' to the table in its physical reality, for example - the appearance of the table itself is already marked with a certain lack - to know what a table really is, what it means, we must have recourse to the word which implies an absence of the thing.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 131.

The implications of this statement are multifaceted and complex. First, the withdrawal-into-self which culminates in the *cogito* has to be presupposed as the vanishing mediator<sup>52</sup> between the two, the missing link around which the transition is organized.<sup>53</sup> In Lacanian terms, the subject has to ‘get rid of’ or repress the Real before we can assume (or construct) a substitute for it in the form of the Symbolic big Other. For Žižek, the subject—which is the vanishing mediator in this structure—must pass through madness in an attempt to grasp the normalcy of *being* a...civilized human subject, a teacher, etc. Thus, within the Žižekian lens, the true nature of the subject is madness (the inner nature of being that expressed in Hegel’s night of the world and found in the Lacanian Real) while the subjective self we (typically) encounter in moments of teacher reflection is the subject of the Symbolic (in the word).

The reality I ‘experience’ as a teacher is similarly mediated as each of its objects—including human beings—have always-already been minimally gentrified or adapted to fit a given Symbolic narrative. At a minimal level, the teacher-subject is such an object in its encounter with the function of the signifier. Žižek makes a dialectical point about the ontological contingency of reality itself whereby I am called upon to establish a suture (or quilting point) in reality by stitching together the edges of the ontological cracks in the Symbolic order. In so doing, I trigger my own subjective signification as a teacher. My signification represents my alienation as a teacher in the Symbolic order where I face, for example, the problem that “descriptions do not naturally and immutably refer to things;” rather, things in retrospect begin to resemble their description.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Importantly, for Žižek, a vanishing mediator is a concept which mediates the transition between two opposed concepts and then disappears. This usage is derived from Frederic Jameson’s usage of the term in *The Vanishing Mediator; or Max Weber as Storyteller*.

<sup>53</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>54</sup> Rex Butler, “What is a Master Signifier,” Lacan, accessed December 01, 2017 <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-signifier.htm>

The failure of reality gains greater clarity when we consider how any notion of subjective or social wholeness is strictly a fantasy; there can be no co-naturalness of subject to her/his world because the subject is always already subjected to the signifier—a name refers to an object because that object is called that.<sup>55</sup> Because of this incongruity, my position as a teacher must be understood as following the formula of the signifier—a stand-in for the stupidity that a name (signifier/teacher) refers to an object (the subject) because that is what we call it (teacher). A teacher's conscious understanding, as such, is always-already fragmented as the teacher is subjected to the tautology of the signifier which announces the dimension of the big Other beyond the subject. Incapable of any Real, harmonious, or unproblematic state of being, the teacher-subject is nothing but lack itself. This presents a basic problem for how teachers can understand themselves in relation to reality as it is always-already mediated by the Lacanian Symbolic order. The Symbolic—as an intersubjective network of meanings—exists as a structure precisely to force teachers into these agreements. Therefore, the Symbolic function is, at a base level, how teachers understand their being in the world.

## **Content & Curriculum**

As an example of this idea, education and educational research (often) remains orientated toward the epistemological and the validation of claims of knowing. In the classroom, this manifests itself through teachers' im/explicit treatment of curriculum/content as a direction representation of reality. The nodus of this generalized connection between reality and knowing is that teacher-subjects are ill-equipped to address the overlapping connections, or lack thereof, between reality and its symbolizations. Further, through our daily interactions with students—

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<sup>55</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

even when approached from the standpoint of critical thinking— teachers construct an ontologically consistent world based on a “logic of truth”<sup>56</sup> that accepts as a given the ontological limits of being. Using a standard reading of the nature of teaching science, as an example, serves to explicate this logic whereby science curriculum (frequently) functions as a series of precise formulas that ‘prove’ the material status of reality. The totality of this understanding (re)presents the modernist logic of American schooling: *there is a reality out there to be found, and ‘we’ (educators) can teach ‘you’ (students) a language to accurately represent it.*

The paradoxical complication of teaching and the ‘truth’ of our content is not only that descriptors do not naturally refers to things but even the nature of science itself, at the level of quantum physics, begins to dispute the concrete nature of reality. Even as a student who hated math and science, I have always been fascinated by the idea that at the quantum level material reality is unimaginably reduced to ephemeral pseudo entities that can only be descriptively captured through abstract mathematical formalizations. What can be observed through the lens of quantum physics is the inherent limitation of the observer (teacher doing the reflection) and her/his knowing about the world (content/ discourse of education). An-other way of stating this failure would be, the only adequate formulation of this quantum level would be to replace all enunciations that relate to the universe and our everyday experience, with a kind of jabberwocky, so all that would remain is a loose syntax of relations.<sup>57</sup> In this example, we can see the emergence of the split subject between our everyday existence in reality and the systemic expressions that allow our everyday (pre-)comprehension or cognition. What quantum physics, in particular, exposes is the inherent deadlock of our understanding, in that, in order to enter the

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<sup>56</sup> Jacques Lacan, Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, & Mark Bracher, *Lacan and the Subject of Language* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 185.

<sup>57</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: on Schelling and Related Matters*, (London: Verso, 2007).



circuit of communication (toward understanding and knowledge, i.e. education), it has to rely on the terms of our everyday language. In this process, language unavoidably calls to mind objects and events of our ordinary, sensible reality. From here it becomes easier to see why it is necessary to take such care in unpacking how we (human-subjects) come to formulate, interpret, and understand reality. It is only by grasping the depth of our own failure and the nature of unknowing that we can begin to formulate what it might mean to be in this world.

### **Subjective Destitution: The Zero-Level of Understanding**

Quantum physics highlights how teachers qua science curriculum are reduced to the logical structure of a virtual being—the simultaneous reduction and limitless potentiality of perception at the intercept of experience. Following Žižek’s ontological development of the subject, teachers face a similar position within the structure and discourse of education. Because of this, the question to ask ourselves is how can we reflexively reach the position of Hegel’s night of the world? The answer, for Žižek, is by risking it all. That is, by risking the noumenal kernel of our phenomenal existence, the subject is able to traverse their own fantasmatic and false understandings of reality and enter a state of *subjective destitution*. Subjective destitution, in this context, is the realization that my Symbolic identity as a teacher is meaningless. Reflecting on this statement as a teacher involves acknowledging the traumatic kernel that is at the core of my identity and the utterly meaningless nature of my previously held understandings about reality. In many ways, what this means is accepting the things that I cherish most about my identity are (likely) false and what is really real has yet to be discovered.

To summarize a bit of the preceding, the primary failure of Kant, uncovered in Hegel, is that the Kantian subject cannot contend with the negativity inherent to its own ontological being;

or, the teacher-subject's self-reflexivity is always-already strictly limited. In Žižek's reading of Hegel's dialectic of reason, Žižek identifies a movement beyond Kant that enables the teacher-subject to comprehend subjectivity without reducing the subject itself to another empirical positive object. To put this in other terms, Žižek seizes on the failures of Kant by developing a subject that is both noumenal and phenomenal. As an illustration of this, whereas Kant's approach to freedom implied that the teacher-subject have immediate access to the noumenal, Hegel never implies a movement from the phenomenal to the noumenal. Instead, Hegelian dialectics grapples with the problem of how—within being—phenomena, or appearances, ever arise as such. Or, *if teachers only have access to appearances, how could the term appearance as such have meaning, since there is nothing that is not an appearance?* Thus, Kant emphasizes the split between phenomena and noumena, while Hegel (re)introduces this split throughout existence itself.

In *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek outlines the importance of the shift from Kant to Hegel as uncovering how being is an unstable absence of a cohesive, unifying oneness of the cosmos.<sup>58</sup> As Žižek sees it, this reflexive realization leads us to the understanding of two different formulations of the Hegelian absolute. First, Hegel's *absolute knowledge* (*das absolute Wissen*) is the acceptance of the irreducible incompleteness not only of the teacher's own understanding of the world (as per Kantian epistemology), but also of the incompleteness of the reality of being in and of itself.<sup>59</sup> Next, the position of *absolute knowing*—as opposed to that of absolute knowledge—involves the reflexive insight into the interminability of the restless dialectical movement. Instead of marking a stable point of knowing, Žižek describes it this way:

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<sup>58</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999).

<sup>59</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999).

The subject does not ask if the content (some particular object of inquiry) meets some a priori standard (of truth, goodness, beauty); it lets the content measure itself, by its own immanent standards, and thus self-authorizes itself. The stance of Absolute Knowing thus fully coincides with thorough (absolute) historicism: there is no transcendental “big Other,” there are no criteria that we can apply to historical phenomena themselves.<sup>60</sup>

For the reflexive teacher, there is no outside. We are always-already included in the world that we construct in our modes of coming to know it—e.g. teacher reflection. The possibility of this process is the completion of a teacher’s world decentration (decentering) which leaves the teacher face-to-face with the gap separating reality from the real. By stripping the teacher of its customary support structure, reflection becomes a means to disrupt the social identity and challenge the personality of the teacher. This radical reduction of being to a zero-level of understanding is the position of subjective destitution.

### ***The Zero-Level of Understanding***

The problem, as we experience it, is that teachers (within the daily reality of our classrooms) are subject’s in a socio-Symbolic matrix that never truly approach a spontaneity of being at a zero-level (subjective destitution). My understanding (prior to the fall) of reality, in such terms, is always supported by *a priori* assumptions about self (students, teaching, education, and so on) and about the world (my classroom, school, etc.), even if I have not yet realized this at a conscious level. To exemplify how far we (educators) are from understanding this zero-level of being, I often raise Frederic Jameson’s thesis about nature of capitalism in

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<sup>60</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012) 387.

conversations with my colleagues. In *Future City*, Jameson writes, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”<sup>61</sup> Žižek frequently repeats this claim in books and interviews urging his audience to think about the strangeness of today’s situation:

Thirty, forty years ago, we were still debating about what the future will be: communist, fascist, capitalist, whatever. Today, nobody even debates these issues. We all silently accept global capitalism is here to stay. On the other hand, we are obsessed with cosmic catastrophes: the whole life on earth disintegrating, because of some virus, because of an asteroid hitting the earth, and so on. So the paradox is, that it’s much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest change in capitalism.<sup>62</sup>

In our current epoch of neoliberal education, one might use Žižek’s logic to paraphrase Jameson, it is easier to imagine the end of world than to imagine the end of our current educational system. While on the surface this statement might seem hyperbolic, but I cannot help but think of how often conversations about real systemic and radical change in education end in deadlock. Of course, educators are quick to cite the progress we have made in x or y, the emergence of alternative and charter schools, and developments in curriculum and pedagogy but, in all of these instances, the systemic structure remains in place.

In response to Žižek and Jameson, Mark Fisher notes that their slogan captures precisely what he means by *capitalist realism*: “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.”<sup>63</sup> Is Fisher’s capitalist realism not analogous to the consistent failure

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<sup>61</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Future City,” *New Left Review*, 21 (2003).

<sup>62</sup> Slavoj Žižek and Astra Taylor, *Žižek!* (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2005).

<sup>63</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley, England: O Books, 2009).

of our (educators') individual and collective imagination, what we—teachers/educators—experience in our conversations about the failures of our past, present, and future education system, and (often) the (un)conscious reality we experience in our schools? But how did we arrive at such an understanding of reality? The process and function of how narrative becomes naturalized and immutable was Roland Barthes' emphasis in *Mythologies*.<sup>64</sup> For him, bourgeois ideologies were “the process through which the bourgeoisie transforms the reality of the world into an image of the world, History into Nature”—this is “the very principle of myth...it transforms history into nature.”

My point here is not to engage in a debate over the possibility of reforming the systemic structure(s) of education but highlight the importance of reaching a zero-level of understanding as a way creating the reflexive space for thinking an-other perspective. As I have outlined in the preceding, the discourse of education (as a representation of the Symbolic or big Other) is split and/or always-already compromised by the Lacanian Real (as social antagonism). Instead of finding some ahistorical governing principle at the centre of this structure, we find the signifier—a meaningless X which sutures the entire field of symbolic reality. Yet, we cannot find our way out of this discursive abyss. While functioning as the site of our alienation in the Symbolic, the empty signifier is also a zero-level symbol that represents a site for political contestation and contingent articulations. It is a traumatic kernel and fundamental antagonism which can be and is expressed as ideology in the form of a social “zero-institution.”<sup>65</sup> Teacher reflection, as such, has the potentiality to function as a fundamental site antagonism and resistance by generating a space to consider both (1) the self in relation to the zero-level institutions and, more importantly, (2) the self at this zero-level of being.

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<sup>64</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972).

<sup>65</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001) 254.

## Zero Level & Absentials

In his exploration of how the mind emerges from matter, Terrence Deacon examines the ontological incompleteness of nature as the only way to scientifically account for the emergence of the mind from matter. As a way of contextualizing this movement, Deacon highlights the striking potentiality that is uncovered through the introduction of the number zero. Deacon's starting point is that the subject cannot relate the phenomena of a value or function to physical matter because all of these phenomena are in some way incomplete.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, as an example, my desires, passions, or aspirations as a teacher cannot be explained in physical terms because they are in some way incomplete or contain an intrinsic without-ness.<sup>67</sup> Deacon labels this without-ness an *absential feature*—"a neologism for which something is missing from our understanding of the physical dimension of these phenomena."

In Deacon's exploration of absential features he focuses on two aspects. First, absence in the sense of a higher-level invisible from the vantage point of a lower level. What this means is that when we divide an organism into its parts, we search in vain among these parts for what creates the unity of the organism. In order to grasp any such unification, we first have to conceive of the organism as reproducing itself through the continuous transformation of its parts. The structure(s) of education, for example, functions in this form. The second of Deacon's features is absence in the sense of an imminent teleology of an organism. This is absence with an orientation toward the future such as the acts of an organism which can only be accounted for by

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<sup>66</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>67</sup> Terrence Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012).

reference to its future states. When we do something in order to achieve something else, we are accounting for these future states and are, by definition, acting in absence from the present.<sup>68</sup>

In Žižek's examination of *disparities*, however, he notes that there is a much more radical potentiality which underlies Deacon's parallel between absentials and the incorporation of zero into mathematics:

The difficulty we face when dealing with absences that matter has a striking historical parallel: the problems posed by the concept of zero ... One of the greatest advances in the history of mathematics was the discovery of zero. A symbol designating the lack of quantity was not merely important because of the convenience it offered for notating large quantities. It transformed the very concept of number and revolutionized the process of calculation. In many ways, the discovery of the usefulness of zero marks the dawn of modern mathematics. But as many historians have noted, zero was at times feared, banned, shunned, and worshiped during the millennia-long history that preceded its acceptance in the West. And despite the fact that it is a cornerstone of mathematics and a critical building block of modern science, it remains problematic, as every child studying the operation of division soon learns.<sup>69</sup>

Zero as a symbol designates the lack of quantity, which, according to Deacon, puts absence at the same level as positive quantities— i.e. *lack is treated as a positive substantiation*. Similarly, Ferdinand de Saussure posits that the identity of a signifier resides only in a series of differences.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>69</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) 41.

<sup>70</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959).

This notion of differentiability, according to de Saussure, is the only feature which distinguishes one signifier from other signifiers. There is no positivity in a signifier as such, it 'is' only a series of what it is not. Following these formulations, Žižek asks, "if all signifiers are just the combination of differences from other signifiers, why then does not the entire network of signifiers collapse into itself? How can such a system retain a minimum of stability?"<sup>71</sup> Žižek's solution is the introduction self-reflexivity itself into the signifying order:

If the identity of a signifier is nothing but the series of its constitutive differences, then every signifying series has to be supplemented—'sutured'—by a reflexive which has no determinate meaning (signified), since it stands only for the presence of meaning as such (as opposed to its absence).<sup>72</sup>

This movement follows Lacan's definition of a signifier as what "represents a subject to another signifier."<sup>73</sup> This is to say, the ontological status of the teacher is that of zero, a void, the signifier is that which can only be a signifier designating by lack. The importance of this movement through zero toward the position of lack is to highlight the process of thinking toward spaces that are otherwise and demonstrate how negativity functions as a positivization of being.

### **Traversing the Fantasy: The Wound as Methodological Reflexivity**

By recognizing (a) the ontological status of the teacher is that of zero and (b) the teacher does not meet some a priori standard of being, we reach a kind of reflexive inversion that confronts the teacher with the fact that the true absolute of being is nothing but the logical disposition of failure (negativity) itself. Reaching this vantage point is synchronous to the

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<sup>71</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>72</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) xx.

<sup>73</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006) 694.



Lacanian position of subjective destitution whereby the teacher gains an awareness of the Symbolic conditions of her/his existence. This position of knowing and destitution represents a critical turning point in the reflexive process because the teacher is logically confronted with two pathways: (1) s/he can reconstitute the fantasmatic structure and Symbolic coordinates of her/his existence or (2) traverse the fantasy by acknowledging (and accepting) that there is nothing behind reality itself and experience the subjective loss of social identity. By refusing the seduction of wholeness, the teacher uncovers the subversive potential inherent to the subject itself. Žižek's wager is that when we encounter "what is in us more than ourselves"<sup>74</sup> (i.e. the subject qua the Real of subjective destitution) we are compelled to act and take responsibility for the context of our own situation. The task of philosophy then, through the Žižekian lens, lies in opening the space to make this thinking possible; a space allowing the teacher-subject to view her/himself as an inherently autonomous being.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, the final question that remains, *if we are to accept the potentiality of the Žižekian lens, is how might we imagine/formulate a reflexive methodology that opens a more direct pathway to the trauma of encountering what is in us more than ourselves?* The clearest intellectual trajectory toward such an encounter that subsumes the subject is through Žižek's reactualization of dialectical materialism—the "radical attempt to ground subjectivity qua subjectivity into objectivity—not merely find the hidden 'objective reality' of thought."<sup>76</sup> But what does this mean? In most Marxist (read standard/contemporary) interpretations of Hegelian dialectics, for example, a contradiction exists between the demands of capital and the abuses of

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<sup>74</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. (London: Verso, 2012) 516.

<sup>75</sup> By way of structuring a Žižekian Hegelo-Lacanian model of subject destitution, this position of teacher reflexivity would be formulated a where the Lacanian Real overlaps with the Hegelian thesis that 'subject is substance.'

<sup>76</sup> Agon Hamza, "Going to One's Ground: Žižek's Dialectical Materialism," *Slavoj Žižek and Dialectical Materialism*, ed. Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda (pp. 163-175). New York: Palgrave MacMillan) 164.

labor. According to this analysis, by critically reflecting on this contradiction, it becomes possible to identify the antagonism at the root of the subject's over-determination—i.e. the cause the subject's alienation. The result is often something akin to Marx's interpretation of false consciousness and exploitation: if workers could gain knowledge of their exploitation that would be enough for the working class to throw off their chains.<sup>77</sup>

But Žižek turns away from standard teleological interpretations of Hegelian dialectics as a movement toward synthesis (non-alienation). What this means is that, for Žižek, there is no positive state of wholeness or understanding to be reached by unifying the subject with a previously unknown version of reality. Or, in terms of the preceding, contradiction is inherent to reason itself. Instead, Žižek describes a “downward synthesis,” a subjective movement toward the negative wherein there is no positive synthesis possible; only a reflexive disjunction “by which a thing emerges out of its own loss.”<sup>78</sup> While, for Žižek, there is *no authentic self* accessible to the subject, this negative reflexive movement uncovers the nothingness at the heart of the subject. The teacher-subject's potentiality, as such, is ensured by the impossibility of subjective closure—what Žižek calls “the ontological crack in the universe.”<sup>79</sup> This ontological crack is the same fissure that is sutured by the signifier in the realm of the Symbolic. Ultimately, the teacher-subject's intervention into this moment represents the reflexive potentiality to locate an irreducible trauma within reality that is the primordial subject itself.

As a way formulating a methodology to locate such an irreducible trauma, Žižek highlights a process of subjective wounding whereby the subject reflexively exposes a signifier not enchaind in a network...by definition ‘psycho-somatic’...a terrifying bodily mark which is

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<sup>77</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy; Volume I* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1983).

<sup>78</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999) 1.

<sup>79</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997) 214.

merely a mute attestation bearing witness to a disgusting enjoyment, without representing anything...”<sup>80</sup> This formulation as a method(ology) act of teacher reflection follows Žižek’s Hegelo-Lacanian pathology beginning with Hegel’s *self-alienation of spirit* or the wound of the subject itself is a wound it tries to heal<sup>81</sup>— i.e. wounding is self-inflicted. That is to say, the ‘wound’ of the reflective method is the introduction of a gap the opens the immediate substantial space for the abstraction of the subject.<sup>82</sup> In terms of active, reflexive struggle, the wound is that which causes our alienation and creates the possibility for our resistance—the wound is the traumatic encounter with the Lacanian Real.

Methodologically, the act of ‘wounding’ represents the possibility that always-already lurks at the centre of every shifting subjectivity. By following the potentiality of this subjective wounding, it becomes possible to imagine teacher reflection as an act rooted in Žižek’s negative ontology (negative in that there is no positive content, the subject can only be located in alienation and antagonism). By focusing on the various stages of negativity developed throughout this chapter, the teacher-subject’s mind is conceived of as always-already possessing the ability to disrupt its own function; to substantiate a break into the immediate understanding (i.e. given interpretation) of reality. What emerges is a manifestation of that which is in us more than ourselves, “in so far as [the wound] sticks out from the (symbolic and symbolized reality) of the body, the wound is ‘a little piece of the real,’ a disgusting protuberance which cannot be integrated into the totality of ‘our own body.’”<sup>83</sup> This piece of the Real is the thing which destroys us but simultaneously is the only things which gives us life.

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<sup>80</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 76.

<sup>81</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1977).

<sup>82</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014).

<sup>83</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 78.

This function of wound can be explained in terms similar to the paradoxical nature of the (psychoanalytic concept) symptom. The symptom is an element that sticks to the subject like a kind of parasite that spoils the game, but if we annihilate it, things get even worse. When confronted with the symptom, we are always confronted with a certain impossible choice. For example, having only been at my current school for a few months, when my principal asked me why I had not taken several days off for a recent bout with pneumonia I replied, “I was afraid that if I were absent for several consecutive days the students’ progress would suffer. But I was even more afraid that in spite of my absence, their progress would *not* suffer!” It is through this internal dialectic process that a shift in the teacher’s perception begins to emerge which makes the wound and the self-appear as their opposites—beginning the reflective injunction anew from multivariate vantage points.

The decisive methodological piece of this movement is that once the teacher is truly within a state of self-alienation s/he can never retreat from it— as this space marks the permanent loss of innocence. This reflexive movement is Hegel’s *negation of negation* in which the presupposed trauma of alienation (negativity) posits itself as a positivity.<sup>84</sup> The teacher-subject, from this methodological state of being, is nothing prior to the loss nor can the teacher return to the point before the fall. Of course, this is not a literal nothingness but the substantive nothing or absence of subjective understanding. This ability of the reflexive wound to tear open space(s) of understanding, critically, posits a new horizon for the emergence of the subject whereby the potential exists to transcend the circularity of perception. In short, by negating our previously understood perceptions of what is real we introduce a form of self-alienation.<sup>85</sup> The paradox of

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<sup>84</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>85</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014).

self-alienation is that the teacher comes to realize his or her previously held understandings of self are false and the process of alienation, in actuality, generates a radically new subjectivity.

Philosophically, this forced shift in the reflexive perspective from the subject of the addressee to the addresser short-circuits the teacher's understanding of their present position by presenting the Real of reality in its alterity of finitude—the otherness of failure.<sup>86</sup> As a radicalization of the reflective method, the wound produces the reflexive point to which it returns—the self-objectified—thereby creating the temporal space of the subject's own autonomy. This temporal space of the teacher's autonomy is also imagined as a potential moment of resistance against the discourse of education. Within this reflective position, the teacher-subject's reflexive narrative begins to collapse the stability of their own ontological horizon generating a reflexivity that highlights how the failures of education are always-already not only epistemological but also ontological. While any attempt to bracket a discourse produces knowledge it also produces an ontological dimension in that the teacher-subject is included within this understanding. In this way, the teacher-subject and object are inherently "mediated," so that any "epistemological" shift in the subject's point of view always reflects an "ontological" shift in the object itself. Or, the subject's gaze is always-already inscribed into the perceived object itself, in the guise of its "blind spot," that which is "in the object more than object itself,"<sup>87</sup> the point from which the object itself returns the gaze.

While research on teacher reflection has produced meaningful narratives and contributions to/within the field, it often remains transfixed within the circularity of its own liminal horizon of being. The problem, ontologically, is that each methodological iteration always-already remains within the field defined by the big Other – the Symbolic order as a point

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<sup>86</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>87</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006) 17

of discursive solidarity or the Symbolic constitution of all discursive fields.<sup>88</sup> For Žižek, this is the classic postmodern trap— and failure of Foucault – whereby the teacher is perpetually trapped within the field of power and free only insofar as they are able to maintain an “ironic distance”<sup>89</sup> from their attachment to the discourse. As a consequence, the ultimate failure of the teacher is the inability to see the possibility of dismantling the entirety of the system itself. However, by locating the truth of subject in alienation itself, the corresponding destitution allows the subject to recognize the arbitrary nature of the Symbolic—the big Other. This is the ethical position of the Žižekian lens that allows the persistence of the struggle despite a radical renunciation. Žižek defines this act as *traversing the fantasy*, meaning the loss of loss, which is the recognition that the Thing we seek only exists in fantasy and the big Other is lacking a final answer.

## Conclusion

This truth as alienation is particular to our consciousness as a teacher, insofar as it relates to the failure encountered in the traumatic, repressed Real and my misrecognition of self in relation to the discourse of education. Education, in such terms, always-already involves what it is not and this universal is enunciated through a relative locus in the constellation of social positions. Thus, teacher reflection as an act of resistance begins with uncovering the failure of our own perception as the result of a misperception at the limits of being in/through the big Other thereby reifying our own existence. In the proceeding chapter, I consider how as a teacher I might re-consider myself in relation to a complex system of philosophical inquiry within the daily reality of my classroom. Each of the passages of my teaching self represents the transition from an epistemological void (un-knowing) to an ontological one (being)—or, more precisely,

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<sup>88</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

<sup>89</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999) 254.

“the passage from the inaccessible Thing beyond the subject’s reach to the subject itself as the Thing incapable of being reduced.”<sup>90</sup> This empty point of negativity is the negation of all determinacy and it is within this space devoid of all content that I am is able to reflexively encounter my true identity as a teacher. Roughly following this framework, the analysis in chapter three sets out to examine my teacher identity as a subjective misrecognition and teacher reflexivity within various philosophical domains and trajectories broadly identified as Žižek’s negative ontology.

Žižek posits that it is possible to overcome our misrecognition of reality by starting with a clean slate—erasing “the entirety of reality in so far as it is not yet born out of the I by passing through the night of the world.”<sup>91</sup> This position is a philosophical and psychoanalytic inquiry into madness that reveals how a withdraw into self and the passage through madness is constitutive of the subject as such. But what does this mean? Again, we arrive at the notion that any totality (or wholeness) is inconsistent with itself. As Hegel puts it, the God of beyond, died on the cross, meaning any Symbolic reality is incomplete and internally contradictory. Similarly, if we as a teacher-subjects no longer presuppose our own symbolic consistency, we also assume the inconsistency of the big Other. This also involves, however, acknowledging and accepting the meaninglessness nature of reality and that my Symbolic identity as a teacher is based on a fantasy. Here we arrive at the other side to face our subjective destitution. The acceptance of this position acknowledges—rather than effaces—the gap between the Real and its symbolization.

One way of grasping this position is through the reflexive process of endless self-critique or hysterical questioning that characterizes subjectivity as such. Žižek argues that it is only through such confrontations with the Real—as Symbolic inconsistency—that we can hope to

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<sup>90</sup> Adrian Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008) 140.

<sup>91</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999) 34.

realize our precious fantasy is shit. It is in these moments of destitution that we might be prompted to act by leaping into the darkness of the unknown and address ourselves at the level of our gap of being. It is here that we remember the Symbolic authority of education has only ever been virtual and it is only efficacious insofar as teachers act as though the big Other exists. From this frame, teachers' subjectivity is not a positive, substantial entity but an incommensurability, a dialectical non-identity. The basic insight here is that Hegelian dialectics and the Lacanian logic of the signifier are two versions of the same matrix.<sup>92</sup>

Žižek's subject as Real is an injection of ontological difference that ruptures both the individual and society, particular and universal without lapsing into fantasies of completeness. Teacher reflection as a means of traversing such fantasies is the inverse of many common-sense approaches to reflection that aim to get rid of fantasies, false consciousness, illusionary prejudices and misperceptions, which distort teachers' view of reality, and finally learning to accept reality the way it really is. By envisioning teacher reflection through the Žižekian lens we do not learn to suspend our phantasmagorical production—on the contrary, teachers must identify with the excess of her/his imagination ever more radically, in all of its inconsistency and failures. That is to say, prior to its transformation into the consistent, reflexive (phantasmatic) frame that guarantees our access to reality. At this zero level, teacher reflection becomes a method of encountering the void of pure subjectivity, confronted by a multitude of spectral or partial objects which, precisely, are exemplifications of the Lacanian *lamella*—the undead object-libido. It is at the level of the lamella that we reflexively encounter the impossible object correlative to the pure void of the subject's absolute spontaneity. In other words, the intersection of Lacan and Hegel in the form of partial objects (here a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition)

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<sup>92</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991).



that are the impossible forms in the guise of which the subject qua absolute spontaneity encounters itself amongst objects.

The ultimate wager of this formulation of teacher reflection is that it is not only possible, but necessary, to conceive of this zero-level of subjectivity, as an unconscious knowledge that awaits its moment to emerge, take shape and shatter the coordinates within which we make sense of today's educational discourse. This dormant teaching self lies in wait, waiting for the surplus of our unknown and repressed knowledge to be translated into a fearless vision of teaching and education yet to come. Our thought must throw itself beyond its familiar course if it is to legitimize its disengagement and unthink the reality from which we were ensnared. As we enter into the Hegelian night, we must be aware that the subject does not survive. As a consequence, teacher reflection as an act of subjective destitution involves the experience of losing one's self. In this experience, the symbolic texture of reality disintegrates, as does one's Symbolic identity. Symbolic subjectivity must then be completely reinvented from nothing—or, as teacher-subjects we must be born again and rise from the abyss.

### CH 3-Hacking ‘The Matrix’: Teacher Ontology at the Abyss of the Žižekian Real

#### Splinter(s) in the Mind

I'm trying to free your mind, Neo. But I can only show you the door. You're the one that has to walk through it. (Morpheus in *The Matrix*)

The imperative to ‘free the mind’ reverberates throughout the Wachowski siblings film *The Matrix*,<sup>1</sup> a cinematic exploration of subjective reflexivity at the limits of reality. The film’s philosophical metanarrative repeats the Platonian *dispositif* of the cave allegory: ordinary humans as prisoners, transfixed by the shadowy performances of what they falsely believe to be real(ity). The foundational difference to be maintained, however, is the distance between the Real and what is perceived in the introduction of a radicalized ontological plane qua virtual reality. Within the film, the Matrix is a computer-generated ‘reality’ that generates a simulated experience that is (nearly) indiscernible from the Real. Metaphorically, what the subject perceives as reality is the Matrix in that it prevents the individual from seeing reality as it effectively is. The trap to be avoided, however, is a contrasting of the virtual domain against material reality;<sup>2</sup> or, in other terms, the Real is not the ‘true reality’ behind the virtual simulation. In this movement, we are able to observe the potentiality of using the Matrix as metaphorical arc by stepping beyond its boundaries to examine the Real nature of reality itself while, simultaneously, maintaining its position as a subjective point of reference.

The problem, for Žižek, concerns the fact that the Matrix is exactly the hypostatization of the big Other, that is, the (virtual) Symbolic network that organizes meaning and thereby

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<sup>1</sup> Lana Wachowski & Lilly Wachowski, *The Matrix* (Hollywood, CA: Warner Bros, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “From Virtual Reality to the Virtualization of Reality,” In *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckery (New York: Aperture, 1996) 290.

structures reality.<sup>3</sup> The film's fallacy, therefore, is that the Matrix impedes access to the Real reality such that beneath the opaque space of the virtual is the 'desert of the Real'. While *The Matrix* is, of course, a fictional narrative, its structure provides a metaphorical scaffolding to articulate the complexities of the Real qua the Lacanian triad: Imaginary, Symbolic, Real. Explanations of this triadic function will serve as a thread binding the seemingly disparate conceptualizations throughout this text. To this end, it is best (for the purposes of this chapter) to imagine the Real as the void that makes reality incomplete and the function of the Symbolic matrix as concealing this inconsistency. Given that notion, one way of approaching the Real is by working through the *objet petit a*, the object cause of desire, that only exists by way of its function in relation to the gaps in the Symbolic it seeks to fill.

As a function of reflexive resistance, *the objet petit a* is a remnant of the symbolization process that sets the interpretive process of this chapter in motion by representing the *lack* created when the subject is severed from the Real.<sup>4</sup> In other words, there is always a gap between the object of desire and its cause, the mediating feature that makes the object desirable.<sup>5</sup> If explicated within a traditional teaching paradigm, for example, the subject (teacher) fetishes the object (student) as a means of fulfilling the teacher's desire, the concretization of the teacher's own Symbolic function through the conveyance of knowledge. At this juncture, the success of the act is irrelevant; rather, it is necessary to understand that the subjective fantasy always-already obfuscates the constitutive consistency of experience structuring reality such that the Real is bearable. Fantasy, in this way, is an Imaginary scenario occupying the place of the Real wherein the teacher's being is neither fully internal nor imposed by the environment. Instead,

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<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Matrix or Malebranche in Hollywood." *Philosophy Today*, SPEP Supplement (1999) 11.

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting for?* (London: Verso, 2000).

fantasy is the unique way that each subject relates to her/himself in relationship to her/his environment.

In our modern epoch of education, however, the Real is further obfuscated by the representation of education as a virtual knowledge economy in which the aging infrastructures of public education are rapidly being re-wired to meet the incessant demands of a global economy. The problem, relative to teacher reflexivity, is such that within the virtual spaces of a classroom, the subject's object of desire may become deprived of its cause. For example, within the virtual, the subject (teacher) and the object of the act (student) remain present. However, when the student(s) exploit the profound openness of the virtual to transcend the traditional barrier between teacher and student (i.e., knowledge itself) the specific intermediary feature that makes the act desirable falls away. In this sense, because so much of education remains predicated on the reduction of knowledge to Google-able information, a teacher's fantasy of self-importance (i.e. the important of the act of teaching) is fissured. While this experience is a traumatic encounter for the subject, the instantiation simultaneously connects the subject's ontological horizon to desire so that it is possible to disentangle the Borromean structure of the Lacanian triad. In sum, by reading the virtuality of scene, both in the Imaginary suture of fantasy and constitutive split of the subject, the inaccessible Real (momentarily) emerges.

At its root, each traumatic encounter is a questioning of the fallibility of teacher's perceptions that highlights how shifts in teacher ontology can radically alter the reality of what we call education. The hard lesson of virtuality is not that teachers no longer have real engagements with their students. Rather, the much more untenable discovery is that there never have been real teaching engagements; teaching has always-already been a game sustained by a more fantasmatic scenario:

*Journal Entry:* What the virtual reality of education exposes is that “real” teaching has the structure of “virtual” teaching with an imagined partner in the sense that my students merely serve as a “prop” for enacting my subjective fantasies as a teacher.

Given the unreliability of the subjective frame, this research seeks to problematize the concept of teacher ontology as it is understood within the Symbolic matrix and inflected upon by the transmission of virtual realities. As a way forward into the abyss of the Real, each reflexive movement seeks to reach the abyss itself; the Schellingian nothingness<sup>6</sup> that is the absence of the big Other. The subject, as such, persists as a self-relating negativity where the groundless space (*ungrund*) of the virtual leaves open the possibility of the act that breaks up the casual chain in knowing, toward a recognition of being, since it is grounded only in itself.<sup>7</sup>

Methodologically, I situate myself as an autoethnographic referent during my school’s adoption of a digital one-to-one program whereby teachers and students are continuously plugged into the educational mainframe. In turning to my own subject(ive) position within a digitalized classroom, the virtual spaces of my class represent *both* the potentiality for a more fully constituted reality and a world that, in its whole, is nothing. The philosophical twist to be added, from a Žižekian perspective, is that it is not until the subject begins to experience the reduction of the wealth of her or his subjective experience to a temporality of electrical signals that it is possible for the mind to begin letting go.<sup>8</sup> However, it is precisely the radical ambiguity of the virtual itself that opens the space for resistance within the educational realm.

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<sup>6</sup> Schellingian nothingness is the abyss of pure absence that is the basis for everything. In ontological terms, the vortex of nothingness is the space that intercedes in and mediates the antagonism of expansion and contradiction, where even a God contemplates its nonbeing.

<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996) 32.

<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “The Matrix or Malebranche in Hollywood.” *Philosophy Today*, SPEP Supplement (1999) 11.

Each movement of this treatise proceeds toward a radical pedagogy (beyond traditional and critical frames) by pathologically re-structuring the failures of the subjective frame. For Žižek, no-thing is not nothing but the void(ing) of the internally situated world of appearances that is subjectivity itself. In this way, the subjective passage represents the transition from an epistemological void to an ontological one. Or, more precisely, “the passage from the inaccessible Thing beyond the subject’s reach to the subject itself as the Thing incapable of being reduced.”<sup>9</sup> The root alienation of this position, in the end, functions as a (Hegelian) self-contradiction that is the drive of dialectical thinking.<sup>10</sup> Here again, the empty point of negativity is not nothing but the inverse of everything, or the negation of all determinacy. It is within this space devoid of all content that the subject is able to reflexively locate her or his true identity. For Žižek, the empty space of primordial loss is a substantiation of Descartes’ withdrawal-into-self as universal doubt or the madness of absolute negativity that preserves the necessity of the reflexive subject.<sup>11</sup> The “madness” of self-reflexivity, in this way, serves as a vanishing mediator between the thing and its representation such that the withdrawal-into-the-self culminates in a radical negativity from which I can no longer attempt to “traverse the horizon” of my subjectivity without accounting for the “terrifying deadlock”<sup>12</sup> of the Real.

### **Subjective Virtuality**

To distinguish again between the Real and reality, the two domains are not synonymous but are mutually exclusive. What the subject experiences as “reality”—the daily-life world in

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<sup>9</sup> Adrian Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2008) 140.

<sup>10</sup> Slavoj Žižek, & John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or dialectic?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ideology* (London: Verso, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 89.

which we “feel at home” can only stabilize itself through the exclusion of the Real<sup>13</sup> because the Real is a traumatic kernel of subjectivity coded to resist symbolization. The function of the Lacanian triad, however, opens a conduit to identify the Real; it provides a traumatic glimpse inward capable of shattering the symbolic coordinates of the subject’s prescribed horizon of meaning. Given the weight of this formulation, Lacan proposes the triadic structure as the elementary matrix of human experience enabling both: (a) a thinking of the modern subject, and, (b) the disentanglement of the failures of subjective perception.<sup>14</sup>

Within Lacan’s schemata, the subjective position follows the formula of the *signifier*—a linguistic circularity that assumes a tautological shape: a name (teacher) refers to an object (the subject) because this object is called that (teacher). This impersonal form announces the dimension of the big Other, the intersubjective network of signifiers,<sup>15</sup> beyond other subjects. Because of the oblique differentiability of this formulation, the subject is always displaced by a minimal difference from the place it occupies. For example, as a teacher, the structure of the field of my understanding (signifier) is predicated on the redoubling of the object (the self-objectified) into itself and the place I occupy in the structure, i.e., the phenomenon of symbolic *reduplication*.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, no subject can ever absolutely ‘fit’ in its place because there always remains a gap at the level of enunciation. Thus, *I am never fully what my Symbolic mandate tells me that I am* because I am always that thing (excess) and my own failure (void).

This formulation is an example of why there is no meaning apart from alienation in the signifier. For this reason, “philosophers may ask why is there something rather than nothing, but

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<sup>13</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction,” *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluation in Cultural Theory: Vol. Two: Philosophy*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Routledge, 2003) 2.

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Introduction,” *Jacques Lacan: Critical Evaluation in Cultural Theory: Vol. Two: Philosophy*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*. (London: Verso, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London: Verso, 2004).

for the subject the question is *why is there nothing when there should be something?*<sup>17</sup> The nothingness of alienation serves as the first identifying point of unity in the subject by functioning as “the object which is always designated by the same signifier.”<sup>18</sup> As an illustration, the self-reflexive ‘I’ that I perceive as a teacher–subject is pathologically barred beneath the mandates of the (Symbolic) big Other. As such, the ontological weight I prescribe to my perceptions as a *positivization of being* is, in actuality, an unconscious misrecognition of the discursive subjugation necessary for the operation of the discourse of education. This illusionary framework of ontological consistency is the context through which I falsely attain recognition in the system yet also thereby become complicit in my own alienation. As a teacher then, this psychic inconsistency plagues my (un)conscious as a reflection always falling short of an imagined identity. As a response I create a teaching persona, the (Imaginary) fantasy of my desire to fulfill the unfathomable X of the Other’s desire (or fulfill what makes me worthy of the Other’s desire). Given my leftist political philosophy, this persona is the ideological and pedagogical stance of a “radical” educator. However, rather than serving to close a breach in my identification within the Other, this movement merely veils the irresolvable lack (the kernel of the Real) that terrorizes my subjective (un)consciousness.

## What Education?

In *L’envers de la psychanalyse*, Lacan describes the Symbolic as an a priori matrix of passages from one discourse to another.<sup>19</sup> Lacan’s interest is specifically focused on the passage from the discourse of the Master to the University (education) as the hegemonic discourse in

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<sup>17</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010) 313.

<sup>18</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989) 89.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, Book XVII*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).



contemporary society.<sup>20</sup> The discourse of education functions such that knowledge comes to legitimize forms of domination by positioning power beneath the “neutrality” of knowledge itself. Education, therefore, functions as a discursive matrix of representations and significations that obfuscates its structure through a constitutive formulation of the “*factual state of things*.”<sup>21</sup> What is critical here is that the shift in the discourse does not signal the departure of the Master but a shift to new forms of domination.

In our present era of late modernity, shifts in education toward digital knowledge economies are often described in Orwellian terms that inevitably fall out into dystopian futures. Technological advancements infiltrate classrooms like a disease that intellectually eviscerates academic discourse beneath the “ceaseless chatter of cyberspace.”<sup>22</sup> Inevitably, the incessant drive of educators toward virtual learning spaces conceal reality by degrading material connections and modifying the coherence of a subject’s being, ensuring that they are educated toward accepting certain futures.<sup>23</sup> The Lacanian parallel is such that things are ‘not right’ because there is a matrix/big Other that obfuscates the ‘true’ reality behind it all. The big Other, in this way, (un)consciously governs the performative dimension of reality so that the subject must appeal to it for knowledge (i.e., the rules of the game) because: (a) the subject is alienated from direct access to reality, and, (b) the subject believes the big Other has (control of) the answers.

Yet, if our fate is one of disciplinary bondage to the technocratic big Other, then the structures of public education are paradoxically being wired to meet the demands of a transmuted state apparatus. Under the guise of limitless potentiality, schools throughout the United States are

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<sup>20</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*. (London: Verso, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*. (London: Verso, 2004) 394.

<sup>22</sup> William Pinar, *What is Curriculum Theory?* (2nd ed.). (New York: Routledge, 2012) 12.

<sup>23</sup> Ben Williamson, *The Future of Curriculum: School Knowledge in a Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

introducing one-to-one digital device programs as a virtual panacea of educational reform. My own introduction to these programs, as a teacher in a one-to-one institution, was propagandized beneath the hackneyed edict that we (educators) are preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist, an edict that was characterized succinctly by the slogan ‘future-ready students’. The problem for many, however, is that these sentiments do little to quell teachers’ (un)conscious fears of a growing obsolescence, a fear commodified through the selling of technology as ‘teacher-proof’ curriculum.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, however, for those like me, as a self-taught computer-programming teacher, shifts toward virtuality bring with them the potential to alter and reformulate the iconoclastic transmissions of the discourse of education. To embrace such a vantage point, though, it is necessary to force the self beyond present understandings of teacher-subjectivity toward a radicalized vision of teacher ontology. Questions of ontological understanding are of course a part of the daily fabric of all teachers’ reality, in both the way teachers see themselves as educators and in the development of their professional persona,<sup>25</sup> however, teacher research rarely considers how questions of *being* at the *abyss of the unknown* stain teachers’ perceptions of the classroom. Instead, there is an implicit assumption that the subject and reality are a constant. For example, a standard reading of the nature of teaching science frequently contextualizes curriculum as a series of precise formulas that ‘prove’ the material status of real(ity). Through this interplay with students, teachers construct an ontologically consistent world based on a “logic of truth”<sup>26</sup> that accepts as a given the ontological limits of being. Further, the totality of this understanding (re)presents the modernist logic of American

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<sup>24</sup> William Pinar, *What is Curriculum Theory?*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Joe Kincheloe, “What You Don’t Know is Hurting You and the Country,” in *What You Don’t Know about Schools*, ed. Joe Kincheloe & Shirley Steinberg (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 24.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire Livre XVII: L’envers de la Psychanalyse*, trans. Jacques Alain-Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1991) 185.

schooling: *there is a reality out there to be found, and 'we' (educators) can teach 'you' (students) a language to accurately represent it.*

Paradoxically, however, the nature of science simultaneously desubstantializes reality itself at the level of quantum physics such that material reality is unimaginably reduced to ephemeral pseudo entities that can only be descriptively captured through abstract mathematical formalizations. Thus, the perceived ontogenetic consistency of reality qua science curriculum is reduced to the logical structure of the virtual—the simultaneous reduction and limitless potentiality of perception at the intercept of experience. This structure is a sublimation of the Real, which masks the trauma of the ontological inconsistency of materialism.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the teacher's presentation of a universal reality functions to substantiate the teacher's consistency of being by masking the trauma of the subject's alienation.

My point here is not to engage in a debate over the material consistency of reality but to grapple with the fallibility of teachers' understanding of the Real. With this in mind, as teachers stare into the abyss of being, the limits of real(ity) begin to fissure, making the Symbolic frame increasingly vulnerable to a 'hack'. Within this space, a hack is imagined as a disjunctive act of resistance whereby both the discursive network and the ontological horizon are disrupted in an attempt to unthink education and willfully embrace the alienation of the Real. Metaphorically, the act is exemplified by the green phosphor text appearing on Trinity's computer screen as she loads the Nmap program onto a system's power grid in *The Matrix Reloaded*.<sup>28</sup> The Nmap hack is a sophisticated port scanner that determines what services are running on a system, which is a common prelude to a cyber intrusion attempt. By assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a

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<sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*. (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Lana Wachowski & Lily Wachowski, *The Matrix Reloaded* (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros, 2004).

particular field, Nmap, like the parallax ontology, finds an open space for exploitation (resistance) within a vulnerable network.

The intent of hacking one's own subjective perception is to force a shift in perspective from the subject of the addressee to the addresser and enter the restricted spaces of the (Symbolic) big Other. Within the domain of the virtual, the Symbolic functions as a network that is constantly (re-)establishing connections inside reality's mainframe for us such that the computer functionally codes itself onto the Symbolic. In other words, the Matrix is the virtual big Other that pulls the strings of reality, thereby ensuring that the subject never fully dominates the effects of its acts. However, to hack the subject position, the user enters into restricted spaces and is confronted with the constraints of a compiled world in which "all is possible, yet nothing is contingent."<sup>29</sup> The hack, as such, brings the irreducible negativity or incommensurability of the subject into focus without lapsing into an imaginary sense of wholeness.

Further, the subjective struggle to free the mind requires the individual to both perceive the depth of her/his own (mis)perception and to convince her/himself that reality is a construct that has been deeply internalized. Unfortunately, as Morpheus tells Neo, "Most people are not ready to be unplugged ... many of them are so ... hopelessly dependent on the system that they will fight to protect it."<sup>30</sup> Thus, to problematize issues of perception within the shifting temporalities of a digital classroom, it is necessary to tarry with the outer limits of the subjective frame. As an example of this frame, the subsequent narrative is an intentional effort to destabilize my own common-sense understandings of teaching such that the textual stability of my perception is forced into a space beyond itself. While I cannot, as Lacan notes, literally step

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<sup>29</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "From Virtual Reality to the Virtualization of Reality." in *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996) 293.

<sup>30</sup> Lana Wachowski & Lily Wachowski, *The Matrix* (Hollywood, CA: Warner Bros, 1999).

outside of myself, the methodological intent of this chapter is to reflexively short-circuit the subject position by presenting reality in its alterity of finitude.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Virtualization of Reality**

Journal Entry: A few months into the one-to-one program and my teaching was anything but radical. In fact, my classroom had deteriorated into an untenable space. The ubiquity of the virtual unveiled an instantaneous world that blurred the boundaries between my students, reality, and technology. The most violent intrusion of all was the total collapse of my curricular content since students always-already had access to vast aggregations of virtual knowledge systems.

The root disorientation of the shift itself is, of course, not a new experience. Students have always leveraged available resources to formulate outbursts of classroom resistance, thereby creating feelings of discomfort for me as a teacher. Over time, however, I have learned to mask these feelings of inadequacy, forcing them into the background of my consciousness, as I navigate the daily reality of teaching. Thus, what confounded me most about the one-to-one program is why this particular technology, compared to other advancements, caused me to suffocate beneath the enunciation of its primary function?

The shift to a virtualized domain also marks a significant expansion in the reach of my students whereby the traditional paradigm is permanently effaced by: (a) generating an alterity of spacing that cannot be translated into an ontologically consistent object by the formulas of modern education, and, (b) a scripting of textual space that is beyond the resistance of the current discursive frameworks of education. Dean describes this transformation as the cyber “Real,” in

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans Bruce Fink (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).

which technological advancements change the structure of the Symbolic, exposing the subject to unbearable intrusions of an over-present Other.<sup>32</sup> For example, by directly accessing various databases of knowledge, students can transcend the traditional barrier between a teacher and a student—knowledge itself—exposing the fragility of the Symbolic order qua the discourse of education.

Through Žižek’s description of how computers inscribe themselves onto the Symbolic realm,<sup>33</sup> I began to imagine my experiences as being mediated by my students’ hijacking of my classroom; each keystroke an enunciation of the pathological absence of the big Other. As such, rather than providing me a virtual reality to escape the trauma of my experience, the digitalization of my classroom confronts me with the horror of the Real by reducing the space to a virtual simulacrum under the prosthetic control of an-Other. In leveraging technology to traverse the gap of the traditional discourse of education, students are hacking the system and exposing the impotence of my authority.

Journal Entry: With each movement, students mocked my authority ... (un)consciously conveying to me, “for all of the control you ‘think’ you possess, reality is far more contingent.” Regardless of the students’ awareness, the act forced me into a fundamentally impotent position; no matter how I responded, my lack of power was confirmed. In every scenario, I was trapped: if I could not, I could not, but even if I could—any attesting (to my control, knowledge, etc.) was doomed to function as a denial—a masking of my impotence confirming that I could not do anything.

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<sup>32</sup> Jodi Dean, “The Real Internet,” in *Žižek and Media Studies: A Reader*, ed. Matt Flisfeder & Paul Willis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Slavoj Žižek, S. “From Virtual Reality to the Virtualization of Reality.” in *Electronic culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996) 293.

Subsequently, by degrading my sense of control, my students forced me into a confrontation with my perception of being within a progressively deteriorating edifice of the Symbolic consistency.

In this way, my students' 'intrusions' were a violent assertion enunciating the impossibility of continuing 'our' exchange within the confines of its current framework. As a virtual remediation of the ontological, the digital interface provides students the space to vocalize what had always been the truth of education: 'my' classroom is, in actuality, 'their' classroom and never has been what I believed it to be. Further, my understanding of the very notion of the term 'classroom' has rapidly degenerated and morphed into an unrecognizable virtual space, a space I am ontologically ill equipped to address, not unlike the computer-generated reality of the Matrix itself. In returning to Plato's *dispositif*, the Matrix metaphorically represents the failure to re-imagine 'forms of disillusionment' in the present, digitalized to create the conditions of our dystopian future. For Badiou, such avoidance of this future necessitates a hypertranslation of Plato in which traditional discourses of education are permanently effaced by an operative matrix of knowledges and transcendental arrangements of 'truths' that are always-already visible.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the split between perception, epistemology, and ontology is mediated by a technological event that cannot be represented in Plato.

Journal Entry: All of my students were sitting before me wearing Beats headphones and watching YouTube videos that explain the meaning of the projected shadows on their iPads. ... If I failed to radically re-conceptualize my role as "their" teacher, I would be reduced to a "passive state of living batteries,"<sup>35</sup> providing the system (education) with the "energy" (curriculum, pedagogy, disciplinary presence) needed to sustain its function.

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<sup>34</sup> Alain Badiou, *Plato's Republic: A Dialogue in 16 Chapters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "The Matrix or Malebranche in Hollywood." *Philosophy Today*, SPEP Supplement (1999) 11.

Because of my impotence within this system, I (un)consciously reify hierarchal systems by condensing all negativity into external figures (i.e., the dislocated referent of the system itself) that serve as the rationale behind my students' failure. However, each of my students' intrusions into this space confronts me with the unbearable prospect of my own self-objectivization that, increasingly, generates a cognitivism that deteriorates into anxiety.

The virtual codification of knowledge, in this way, produces 'simulated' experiences that become increasingly indiscernible from 'real' social contexts. Each clutching fetishization of false imagery signifies my growing desperation to feel I have a grasp on reality, "the forced choice between some-thing and no-thing."<sup>36</sup> Although each formulation is a progressively violent reduction of my teaching persona, I desperately seek any movement away from nothingness, for even in being we can, as Sartre reminds us, fear nothingness.<sup>37</sup> While the difficulty of navigating this space is problematic, the mediated exposure forces a confrontational status with the retroactive awareness of non-being. My existence, in such a context, is not defined by a reality that is not real but by fissures in the ontological edifice. In this precise formulation, it is not that there was once a 'real' reality and now there is only a 'virtual' reality; instead, through the virtualization of education, I become retroactively aware that there never was a 'real' reality, or, more precisely, my reality always was virtual; I just was not aware of it as a teacher. *What the virtual reality of education exposes, then, is that 'real' teaching has the structure of 'virtual' teaching with an imagined partner in the sense that my students merely served as a 'prop; for enacting my fantasies of self as the teacher.*

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<sup>36</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on 9/11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), 19.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966).



## The Fallacy of the Real

By returning to the Platonian *dispositif* a final time, the fantasy I had constructed of myself as a radical teacher is, in actuality, a perverse enactment of the Rancièrian critique of Plato. For Rancière, Plato's failure was situating students as passive (in the cave) and only there to pursue pleasure (in "images and appearances"),<sup>38</sup> in other words, they were individually unable to pursue the truth. In a similar way, my fantasy of a self (un)consciously attached to *a priori* incapacities of my students concretizes the opposition between subject positions, teacher/student. The act of desiring (even as a critical/radical act), based on a perceived distance between teacher and student thus (re)creates the opposition itself. My fantasy, as such, fulfills the object cause of my desire (*objet petit a*) by supporting the repressed scenario that the system is, in truth, oppressive, and educators such as myself are needed to shed light on systemic violence.

Thus, the discomfort I experience within the technological realm is a short-circuiting of my ontological edifice wherein glitches in the screens of my perception expose the fantasy structure of my self-referential importance. With each deteriorating representation of reality, the chaos beneath a faltering education system is exposed. In the absence of an anaphoric big Other, there are only my paranoiac fantasies and the terrifying Real of an unmasked self:

*Journal Entry:* The primary impetus behind my "radical" teaching practices was never a means of developing students' consciousness or a liberatory critique of the system that subjugates them. Rather, my motivation was the fulfillment of a fundamental narcissism, a pedagogical stance that realized my political desire to be a "radical," and my engagement in a critique of the system created an "Other" to be resisted and defined my role in its resistance.

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

In this moment, I realize the entire impetus behind my desire to teach is fraudulent, and not only had I not been acting on my students' behalf, I am, in actuality, furthering their subjugation.

*Journal Entry:* What my students had always-already realized was that any attempt to overcome an educational impasse paradoxically necessitates them seeking more knowledge within the system of their subjugation, thereby forcing them to be complicit in their own alienation<sup>39</sup> or resistance against it. However, because of my positionality, I naively believed that I was in a position of authority beyond the discourse of education. What I failed to recognize, and what my students asserted, was that I merely served as an avatar for the Master. For example, despite my resistance to the false neutrality of knowledge, I was pathologically anxious over meeting the terms of the system's output demands (e.g., common core, AP test scores, college admissions, etc.), which ultimately determined my "success" within the machinery of discourse. Thus, as a teacher–subject, I was always hysterically addressing the system as a Master.

For Wall and Perrin, this is the fundamental alienation preventing educational progress; teachers are often well aware of the structural illusions undergirding the system's failures, but we still do not renounce them.<sup>40</sup> As a basal example of this, teachers endlessly complain about the intrusions of standardized curriculum, but still we teach it. However, the authors' precise point, through a Žižekian lens, is that it does not matter if educators know that a standardized curriculum is not a representative evaluator of learning or instruction: "all that matters is that in [their] actual behavior [they] continue to act (through its teaching) as though it is."<sup>41</sup> Thus, in a

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<sup>39</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Objet a in Social Links." in *Reflections of Seminar XVII: Jacques Lacan and the other side of psychoanalysis*, ed Justin Clemens & Russell Grigg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 107.

<sup>40</sup> Tony Wall & David Perrin, *Slavoj Žižek: A Žižekian Gaze at Education*. (London: Springer, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Tony Wall & David Perrin, *Slavoj Žižek: A Žižekian Gaze at Education*. (London: Springer, 2015) 38.

strictly codified way, whether I ‘care’ or ‘do not care’ about my students is rendered inconsequential because I cannot offer them any real assurance (about their achievement) without the acknowledgment of the Master.

### **Žižek’s Hegelo-Lacanian Pathology**

For Lacan, there is an intimate rapport that conjoins madness and freedom, a rapport of possibilities due to the virtuality of the gap from which the subject is alienated.<sup>42</sup> From this position on the precipice of the virtual and the actual, it is possible for the subject to become unglued from a direct referential relationship. “The moment of decision is the moment of madness” precisely in so far as there is no big Other to provide the ultimate guarantee, the ontological cover for the subject’s decision.<sup>43</sup> To fully withdraw the self into the void of the Real, however, I must make a final speculative turn toward Hegel. Such a short-circuiting of the ontological function, for Hegel, is an antagonistic wounding that allows for higher planes of consciousness through violent confrontations of subjective presuppositions and the disavowal of the desire for wholeness.<sup>44</sup> This disavowal necessitates a reflexive break from understandings of teaching codified by the illusionary fantasy of ontogenic misrecognition described in the preceding narrative.

Imagined here as an encounter with the dark side of the ontological edifice, this final act of teacher reflexivity necessitates a confrontation with the terrifying imaginary of the Real wherein I disengage from my own “radical pathology.”<sup>45</sup> Methodologically, this reflexive

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<sup>42</sup> Slavoj Žižek, S. “*Objet a* in social links.” in *Reflections of Seminar XVII: Jacques Lacan and the other side of psychoanalysis*, ed Justin Clemens & Russell Grigg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 107.

<sup>43</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Da Capo Senza Fine”, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, ed. Judith Butler, Ernest Laclau, & Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2000) 258.

<sup>44</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less than nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000) 32.

endpoint is, for Žižek, a movement toward ontological failure whereby the abyss beyond emerges as a groundless nothingness out of which everything springs *ex nihilo*.<sup>46</sup> Nothingness, in this sense, is a subversive transformation wherein the subject encounters the radical alienation of an asubjective opacity rather than its own self-image:

Reflection always fails [when] the subject ... encounters in a mirror some dark spot, a point which does not turn into his mirror-picture—in which he cannot “recognize himself.” It is, however, precisely at this point of absolute strangeness ... that the subject is inscribed into the picture.<sup>47</sup>

Thus, the *subject qua the subject of the look* (reflection) is precisely the “inherently incomplete pathological stain”<sup>48</sup> from which the subject is able to perceive itself against the chaos of its own (mis)recognition. Ontologically, this is the moment the ‘true’ Žižekian subject emerges because it is within this recognition that the ‘event’ is doubled and the alienation of the Other becomes present, transforming an act of narcissistic reflexivity into an ethical act of collective enunciation.

The recognition of myself as a ‘pathological stain’ of ontological finitude within a virtuality of shifting educative experiences exposes me to ephemeral temporalities, causing me to seize within the vortices gaps and voids in the fabric of reality. For Hegel, this is the ‘night of the world’ where “the human being is the night, the empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of representations and images, of which none belong to him.”<sup>49</sup> What this means is that the fantasmatic phenomenon of “seeing one’s self seeing” as the

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<sup>46</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2008) 89.

<sup>48</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2008) 89.

<sup>49</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 353.

disembodied “pure gaze” of ontogenetic experience collapses the fantasy frame<sup>50</sup> into the abyss of radical negativity at the heart of the subject. Radical negativity, as such, cannot be sublated into a stable social edifice. That is to say, it is a self-relating negativity that puts at risk and dissolves the social structure that supports both the finite status of the teacher subject and the ideal of the discourse of education.

From this position of lack, Hegel develops an “energy of thought” that is capable of dissolving the (apparently) seamless fabric of reality, the “circle that remains self-enclosed,”<sup>51</sup> bestowing autonomy on the parts before dismemberment. For Žižek, this depiction constrains the big Other to a network of signifiers and details the subjective “capacity to reduce the organic whole of experience to an appendix [of] ‘dead symbolic classifications.’”<sup>52</sup> Thus, it is only by encountering the night of the world, an obscene proto-reality of partial objects floating against the background of an ontological void,<sup>53</sup> that the subject can experience the reflexive negativity necessary to dissolve our symbolically constituted reality,<sup>54</sup> a movement that propels us forward like Morpheus’s ‘splinter in the mind’.

### A Third Pill

In the end, the radical abyss of subjective failure functions as a systemic hard drive crash “wiping the slate clean,”<sup>55</sup> an act that re-codes a teacher’s ontological framework toward an ethics of resistance. Within the asymmetric imagery of the virtual domain, my own

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<sup>50</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) 175.

<sup>51</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 18-9.

<sup>52</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Revised ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001) 59.

<sup>53</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

<sup>54</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Casualty* (London: Verso, 1994).

<sup>55</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ideology* (London: Verso, 1999) 154.

pathologically barred subjectivity is only present through the realization that my perception is always-already split, a dialectical antagonism between thought and being. For Lacan, this position is an inversion of Descartes *cogito*: “I think where I am not; therefore, I am where I do not think.”<sup>56</sup> The barred subject, in this way, is evacuated as an ethical manifestation, causing a ruptured perception toward a transitory lack in the Other; i.e., there is no big Other.<sup>57</sup> From such a position, it is possible to enunciate the otherness of the Other through a shared understanding of alienation with my students—the formulation of the ethics of the Real.

It is thus through my students that the Real of reality emerges within virtual spaces of our classroom. After repeated failures to free my mind from the disillusionment of the discourse of education, the ontological abyss of virtuality forces me to grapple with the understanding that the ‘rules’ of reality only govern one particular version of reality. The only Real to experience is in the experience of alienation itself. This Real, in this sense, is analogous to the fabricated liberatory potential (pathways) of Neo’s forced choice between red and blue pills:

You take the blue pill, the story ends; you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.<sup>58</sup>

If contextualized within the educational domain, for example, one could easily imagine the blue pill as traditional pedagogy and the red pill as critical pedagogy. The problem, however, is that Neo’s enlightenment is contingent on Morpheus’s teaching, a pedagogical incongruence with the ontological structure of the film. The way forward, for Žižek, is to ontologically conceive of a *third pill*: ...[a] pill which would enable me to perceive not the reality behind the illusion, but

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<sup>56</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006) 166.

<sup>57</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Casualty* (London: Verso, 1994) 42.

<sup>58</sup> Sophia Fiennes & Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (London: Amoeba Films, 2006).

*reality in the illusion itself* (emphasis added).<sup>59</sup> A third pill is conceived here as radical pedagogy beyond traditional and critical pedagogy, a means to search for reality in the illusions itself. The pedagogical third pill, as such, is a perpetual shift that generates a subjective gaze that is “always-already inscribed into the reflexive point itself,”<sup>60</sup> allowing the subject to relate to the world, no matter how paradoxically.

Regardless of the depths of our (mis)recognition, the Žižekian lens asserts that there always exists an indivisible remainder, or “bone in the throat,”<sup>61</sup> that resists symbolization. Radical pedagogy, as such, is centered on the subject’s ability to understand and enunciate the conditions of her/his circumstances, allowing for far-reaching reconceptualizations of the problems and possibilities of educating. Therefore, teaching, like philosophy, “begins the moment we do not accept what exists as given.”<sup>62</sup> By metaphorically glimpsing into the spaces of betweenness that eludes our ontic horizon, the virtuality of education highlights a way of thinking about education without prescribed answers, where answers can only ever be partial and may result in a violent *passage à l’acte*. Experiencing the excessive remainders of subjectivization allows interlopers to envisage displacements in the Real as a gap or shift between perspectives that “pulverizes sameness into [a] multitude of appearances.”<sup>63</sup> Within this multiplicity, hacks emerge within the gap separating objects in reality from the virtual simulacra,

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<sup>59</sup> Sophia Fiennes & Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (London: Amoeba Films, 2006).

<sup>60</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 17.

<sup>61</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000) 28.

<sup>62</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) 2.

<sup>63</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 26.

thereby re-coding *ergo sum* to read “I think where the self is evacuated;”<sup>64</sup> in this absence, it is possible to re-articulate discourse as a radicalized ontology of education.

If educators are to take seriously the possibilities of this frame, we must not be so arrogant to presume an answer and offer a plan of action for others, but tarry with the negativity of our own ideological condition. The task, then, for all ‘radical’ educators is to begin hacking their own Symbolic network by encountering the trauma of the Real again and again. It is only from this position that teachers can act autonomously, inverting the current system of education into a state of negative universality, a universality of irreducible Symbolic inconsistency. As expressed through the linking of violent experiences and common antagonisms, not the neutral translations of postmodernity, the true radical position is not just the readiness to save ourselves or our students but also the “ruthless dedication to annihilating those who made the victims,”<sup>65</sup> even if this involves the thorough decimation of our own position.

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<sup>64</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy your symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out*, Revised ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001) 17.

<sup>65</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five essays on 9/11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002) 68.



## CH 4- Kubrick avec Žižek: Gaze, Fantasy, and the Violence of Being

### Introduction to Chapter Four

In the Ernst Lubitsch film *Ninotchka*<sup>1</sup> the male protagonist, Leon, visits a cafeteria and orders a coffee without cream; the waiter replies: “I’m sorry, sir, we have no cream. Can it be without milk?” In both cases, the customer will receive black coffee, so what is the difference? Readers of Žižek will, of course, recognize this as one of his well-worn jokes explaining the Hegelian logic of differentiability whereby the lack (or not-All) itself is registered as a positive feature. In this case, coffee, as the ‘not-All’, is accompanied by a different negation. The reason, Žižek spends time on such dialectical jokes is because they uncover the function of ideology at its purest in what many claim are ‘post-ideological times’—or, in terms more familiar within the educational terrain post-metanarratives. Žižek, however, rejects the claim that we are living in post-ideological times noting that to detect ideological distortions: “one should note not only what is said, but the complex interplay between what is said and what is not said, the unsaid implied in what is said: do we get coffee without cream or coffee without milk?”<sup>2</sup>

Žižek complicates this issue further by applying the Hegelian concept of the negation of negation – “a double, self-referential negating that does not involve a return to a positive identity through synthesis”<sup>3</sup>—to our subjective understanding of identity. Following this logic: a coffee with no cream is not just ‘with no milk’ but also ‘not with no-cream,’ and this second negation, according to Žižek, is more than purely symbolic. Thus, by perceiving the beyond—the point of differential opposition whereby it is logically necessary to consider that of ‘coffee with X’ versus ‘coffee without X’—the logic arrives at the core of the subjective experience relative to our

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst Lubitsch, *Ninotchka* (United States: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939).

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Trouble in Paradise: From the End of History to the End of Capitalism*. (London: Allen Lane, 2014) 29.

<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 176.

understanding of being in the world.<sup>4</sup> In sum, Hegel's negation of negation is the process whereby the subject's presupposed trauma of alienation posits itself as a positivity through an internal dialectical process that shifts the subject's perceptive. This shift is a new perspective that makes the original (mis)recognition of self appear as its opposite—beginning the reflexive injunction again from another vantage point.

But why spend time on such dialectical formulations? In professional development settings, I often deploy another of Žižek's dialectical jokes about a Soviet worker suspected of stealing to contextualize the possibilities of dialectical thinking within the confines of our daily reality of teaching. Every evening, as the worker suspected of stealing leaves the factory, the factory guard carefully inspects the wheelbarrow the worker pushes in front of him. But each night, the guard finds nothing; the wheelbarrow is always empty. Night after night, this same scene unfolds. The worker passes the guard, but the guard finds nothing. Finally, the truth emerges, what the worker is stealing is the wheelbarrows themselves.<sup>5</sup> What this example illustrates is that understanding is always-already just out of our reach but *the way we perceive a problem is the problem itself*. In this precise way, we could work through all the functional differentials ('coffee not with no cream' is merely 'coffee with cream' and so on) but if we fail to articulate a vision beyond these differential equations, is it ever truly possible to push the boundaries of how we understand our self in relation to our understandings of the world around us?

### **Why Žižek?**

In the first long-form reading of Žižekian theory within the field of education, Tony Wall and David Perrin implicitly task readers with the refutation of what exists as given through a

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<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).

hysterical questioning of how the content we encounter is actually possible—a process they broadly define as “Žižekian critical pedagogy.”<sup>6</sup> In questioning the epistemological and ontological horizon of our understanding, Wall and Perrin establish thematic, pedagogical, and philosophical threads that bind their educational vision to their conceptualization of the Žižekian gaze—a means of radically conceptualizing the “problems and possibilities of educating.”<sup>7</sup> There is, however, a certain irony in this frame. For many readers who have spent a great deal of time engaging in (or grappling with) Žižek’s work, s/he is almost certain to encounter a maddening failure of comprehension. Thus, if we are similarly tasked here with considering the ‘problems and possibilities of educating,’ the question arises, *Why Žižek?*

The central issue at the heart of this question is the difficulty readers face when engaging with Žižek—a point almost universally leveled by his detractors, poignantly summarized by Rex Butler:

He speaks rapidly through a strong Central European accent and a lisp, constantly circling back upon himself to try to make himself clearer, threatening never to stop. We feel he is making the same point over and over, but we cannot quite grasp it, and in order to do so he must take in the entirety of Western philosophy and culture, both high and low: from Schoenberg to sci-fi, from quantum mechanics to the latest Hollywood blockbuster, from now-forgotten figures of eighteenth and nineteenth-century German philosophy to the notoriously obscure writings of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan ...<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Tony Wall and David Perrin, *A Žižekian Gaze at Education* (London: Springer, 2015) 4.

<sup>7</sup> Tony Wall and David Perrin, *A Žižekian Gaze at Education* (London: Springer, 2015) 5.

<sup>8</sup> Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2005) 2.

In short, using myself as an example, I often walk away from an engagement with Žižek struggling to comprehend the full depth of what was made available, my mind filled with a dizzying array of philosophical concepts and references to popular culture. Struggling to retain the information and comprehend the interconnectedness between theories, concepts, and examples, the following days are *always* spent conducting long hours of research. As the picture slowly gains greater clarity, I realize this is precisely Žižek's point. While I can personally attest to how maddening this process can be, the daunting spectre of comprehension exemplifies the pedagogical implications of Žižek's work. When one engages with Žižek, the onus is placed on the reader/student to interpret the material being presented. The unnerving interjection of philosophical examples and circularity of his presentation teaches by forcefully delaying our comprehension.

As reader/student, Žižek requires us to struggle with his text which not only produces understanding but also space for interpretation and resistance. What is unique about this presentation is how we are (un)consciously forced to locate ourselves within his narratives, we are forced to consider ourselves in relation to what he has said and how the moment might draw us nearer or push us further from his philosophical lens. While this might be said of any theoretical text, Žižek himself warns that beneath the user-friendly surface of his texts, there is a position deployed with scant regard for the wealth and warmth of any humanistic concerns. In *The Parallax View*, Žižek advises of "cruel traps" set for the reader who is trying to decipher its meaning,<sup>9</sup> highlighting the true difficulty we face in unraveling the clues he has placed before us. In a strange way, I have often wondered if he is using the text itself to exemplify the subject's own *a priori* alienation at the heart of his philosophical edifice.

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<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 11.

When I imagine the Žižekian process within the confines of my own classroom, Žižek exemplifies an unorthodox use of dialectic engagement between self (author/teacher) and other (reader/student) whereby gaps in understanding are left open for interpretative threads to split and spiral in a multitude of direction. But, of course, leaving spaces open for student interpretation is old hat in education. Whether referring back to Dewey, designing a project-based lesson, or reimagining transformative learning, good teachers have always left gaps open for student (re)interpretation. Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher suggest that Žižek's particular use of an unsystematic approach to argumentation is an example of the rhetorical method termed *parataxis*. Parataxis is a "style that suppresses the logical and casual connections between clauses in a sentence, paragraph, chapter, or work."<sup>10</sup> Using an example from my own classroom to highlight the distinction between syntax (which includes logical and causal connections) and parataxis (which suppresses them), it is the difference between 'the Syrian boy is shaking because of the mortar shells' (syntactical) and 'the burst of a mortar shell; the boy is shaking' (parataxis). A paratactic work, such as we often find in Žižek, leaves it to the reader to infer what the connection is between ideas. In the very Žižekian-ly titled chapter of *The Parallax View*, "The Unbearable Heaviness of Being Divine Shit," he references the possibility of the paratactic: "a new level of interconnectedness, a "paratactic" field of secret links, of echoes and reverberations between monadic elements—something, I am tempted to claim, not unlike the inner links of Plato's *chora* which precede the gird of ideas."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher, *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) 21.

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 158

While Sharpe and Boucher's (and others') analysis is meant to serve as a critique or at least a questioning of Žižek's contribution to continental philosophy<sup>12</sup>—within the traditional ideal of philosophy providing a sustained system of inquiry—it is fruitful (for the purposes of this text) to consider parataxis as pedagogical method in itself. As an example, part of what is lacking (for many) in Žižek are the limited number of direct political positions he provides—despite his often overtly radical analysis. But following the notion of parataxis, there is often more to his arguments than is immediately apparent. By failing to define a direct position, he is leaving open gaps in the analysis for the reader to draw their own independent conclusions. In so doing, Žižek subverts the position of the Master by highlighting the pointless nature of desire for activity without an understanding of the limitations imposed on us by the big Other—or our *a priori* state of alienation. Another risk, however, as was pointed out to me by colleague, is that Žižek's writing is so obtuse that people will choose to not read his work at all. This point might have even greater implications in education, where individuals already feel time is a constantly dwindling commodity.

Pedagogically, the aim of a paratactic lens is to leave the interlocutor to infer what is missing within the logical breaks and interruptions of thinking. Within Žižek's own argumentation there always remains an implicit space (or gap) that leaves the reader unfulfilled, left to infer what might be. This approach suggests that one of the primary critiques levied against Žižek – a lack of a directly articulated positionality or system of thought– is precisely the point of the analysis itself. According to Sarah Kay, the discomfort we might experience when trying to understand the full interconnection between the example and the argument being posited by Žižek can be attributed to the difficulty of writing on (or around) the Lacanian Real:

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<sup>12</sup> Žižek takes up this critique directly in his keynote address, *Am I a Philosopher?* delivered at the *International Žižek Studies Conference* on May 27, 2016.

the object of inquiry that cannot be encountered directly but must instead be discussed through its effects.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Žižek himself notes, the only way to comprehend Lacan is to approach his work as a work in progress, as a succession of attempts to seize the same traumatic kernel.<sup>14</sup> Comprehension, as such, is always in negotiation, or perhaps, always faltering as each kernel of understanding only uncovers a deeper level of our own misrecognition. From this position, we might say that Žižek's pedagogical style is not the result of a poorly developed argument or a lack of a philosophical system but is the result of his writing drawing us nearer to the fringes of our understanding of being in the world.

By disrupting and disassembling the spatial and temporal continuities of the spectator's understanding, many of Stanley Kubrick's films can be described as mysterious or enigmatic in a manner akin to Žižek's paratactic method. The crucial element binding Kubrick's enigmatic work, according to Phillip Kuberski, is a "devotion" to the ellipsis: "leaving things out of the film means leaving them "in"—for the audience's own consideration." Kuberski goes on to note, "Kubrick's use of ellipsis includes a tendency to leave out explanatory scenes that would close other narrative gaps."<sup>15</sup> In more generalized terms, the filmic ellipsis is often used for narrative compression, analysis, or interpretation by linking separate moments in such a way that a discursive relationship emerges.<sup>16</sup> But for Kubrick, the ellipsis is used in a disjunctive manner, dividing and disjoining the discourse of the film from our everyday life-world without completely fissuring this connection.

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<sup>13</sup> Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Philip Kuberski, *Kubrick's Total Cinema: Philosophical Themes and Formal Qualities*. (London: Continuum, 2012) 7.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: Structuralism, Post-structuralism, and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

In Mario Falsetto's narrative and stylistic analysis of Kubrick, he further highlights the gap between the surface meaning which appears on a screen and its deeper, subtextual meaning, as central quality of his films. Falsetto's analysis draws our attention to the intricacies, complex organization, and layers of meaning that may not be present to spectators of Kubrick's films.<sup>17</sup> When surveying each film, Kubrick forces us to search for the relations among its various components—from scene to scene, shot to shot—trying to construct a (somewhat) cohesive narrative. But the obliqueness of Kubrick's presentation is such that meaning also resides between shots and even between frames. Thus, as spectators of Kubrick's films, we must embrace varying states of discomfort, a discomfort derived from the implicit trust he has placed in us to experience and accept the ambiguity of his films. As Kubrick himself noted: "I'm sure that there's something in the human personality which resents things that are clear, and, conversely, something which is attracted to puzzles, enigmas, and allegories."<sup>18</sup>

Together, what Kubrick and Žižek highlight is that *the way we view a problem is (often) the problem itself*. Within the prism of education, we see the avoidance of this discomfort in students' expectation of an answer when they ask a question—and teachers mirror this expectation of their students. As teachers how often do we turn to reflection only when searching for an answer to a particular issue we are facing in the classroom? When we begin reading a text (book, journal article, etc.) on education is there not at least a small part of us that expects the authors to formulate a conclusion to their analysis—the proverbial 'thing' we can take back to our classrooms? I am always taken aback by how quickly professional development is labeled a 'waste of time' when this proverbial thing is lacking. My colleagues often charge theorists and philosophers with expounding on ideas to no particular end, for solving no practical problem.

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<sup>17</sup> Mario Falsetto, *Stanley Kubrick: A Narrative and Stylistic Analysis*, New and expanded 2nd ed. (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Alexander Walker, *Stanley Kubrick, Director*. rev ed. (New York: Norton, 1999) 38.



But what might happen if instead of asking Žižek or Kubrick a question and expecting an answer, we considered Žižek or Kubrick's work as the question itself? That is to say, how does what is presented before us function not as an answer but as a question that starts us on our path of discovery?

To function as the question and not the answer is the task of the analyst in Lacanian psychoanalysis. In a similar way, Žižek claims that "the duty of philosophy is not to solve problems, but to redefine problems, to show how what we experience as a problem is a false problem." He uses the hypothetical example of a deadly comet colliding with earth as a clear and present danger that does not require philosophy, just good science. For Žižek, "if what we experience as a problem is true, then we don't need philosophy." Instead, what is great about philosophy is precisely philosophers lack of answers.<sup>19</sup> Reading Kubrick with Žižek allows us to approach this question from the other side of the same coin. As spectators of a film, like the readers of a book, we expect answers. Answers that make sense and provide a somewhat orderly conclusion to the narrative. When we don't get answers, we (often) feel cheated. But why do we feel cheated? As we have seen through Žižek, the point is to provide questions not answers and Žižek and Kubrick's work provides us a platform for questioning how this simple lack can cause such frustration.

When comparing the questions that are present in Žižek's work to that of Kubrick, we might say that Kubrick's formulations of unknowing are a bit more *Kafkaesque*. Anyone who has read Franz Kafka's work—such as *The Trial* or *Metamorphosis*—undoubtedly arrives at the conclusion that certain elements of the narrative are not meant to be solved—only questioned—because the reader will not find satisfactory answers within the text. But this is precisely Kafka's

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<sup>19</sup> Slavoj Žižek and Astra Taylor, *Žižek!* (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2005).

point. In life, there are no clear answers. The only answer is what you are able to formulate in your own mind. In the text I return to most often, Kafka's *The Trial*, Joseph K. is accused of a crime he doesn't understand by a court he cannot communicate with. There are no clues because there are only generalities—not particularities.<sup>20</sup> There are no answers, only questions, but no amount of personal investigation can offer greater clarity either. In a sense, Kafka represents the danger of Žižek's paratactic method, if we fail to provide our readers/students signposts within the abyss, they will simply wither within the nothingness. But there is also something present in Kafka—and Kubrick—that allows us to understand something about ourselves in relation to the Žizekian method.

In a recent TED-Ed animated talk by Noah Tavlin he asks, “*what makes something Kafkaesque?*” Explaining how many cavalierly misuse the adjective and what it truly means, Tavlin notes, “The term Kafkaesque has entered the vernacular to describe unnecessarily complicated and frustrating experiences, especially with bureaucracy.”<sup>21</sup> But is standing in a long line to fill out confusing paperwork at the DMV truly Kafkaesque? Does a student rotely completing worksheets at a teacher's command really capture the richness of Kafka's vision? Probably not. In Talvin's own exploration he notes, “It's not the absurdity of bureaucracy alone, but the irony of the characters' circular reasoning in reaction to it, that is emblematic of Kafka's writing,” Ben Marcus adds even greater context, although he never directly uses the term Kafkaesque, by making an argument about what Kafka's “quintessential qualities” were, including “affecting use of language, a setting that straddles fantasy and reality, and a sense of

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<sup>20</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Noah Tavlin, “What Makes Something Kafkaesque?,” TedEd, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/what-makes-something-kafkaesque-noah-tavlin>

striving even in the face of bleakness—hopelessly and full of hope.”<sup>22</sup> As a reader, for example, we begin to experience the outer boundaries of what Marcus describes when we are provided with a riddle with no possibility of a solution; yet, we cling to the notion that there must be a solution.

Kubrick’s narrative structure is often threaded with similar experiences: *The Shining* ends with an image that is impossible to contextualize within the film’s narrative arc and *A Clockwork Orange* concludes with a somewhat ambiguous statement from the film’s protagonist—both instances threatening to undermine the entire film. With each example, we are left to interpret how it all fits together, every answer is a subjective fabrication of reality—as ‘correct’ as any other formulation. On a basic level, we encounter both the pain and possibility of paratactic method, the ‘meaning’ of the text exists only in the gaps of understanding and our struggle to piece together a coherent thread that connects the disparate pieces. But the real disruptive potentiality of the paratactic method gains greater clarity when we understand, for example, how each of the examples above (the DMV and the student) fail to truly meet the criteria of being Kafkaesque. Despite the inane and soul-crushing actuality of each, it is not until we find a perverse pleasure in the deadlock or find ourselves *hopelessly full of hope* that we will uncover some unknowable interpretation that the example becomes truly Kafkaesque. What Kafka teaches us about Kubrick and Žižek, in Lacanian terms, is that by locating the pleasure we find in the deadlock itself, we open reflexive spaces for a for a traumatic encounter with the Real of our subjective being.

Like picking at the scab of an unhealed wound, this is the function of Alex’s character throughout this chapter; he is a question without an answer and the deadlock through which I

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<sup>22</sup> Joe Fassler, “What It Really Means to be ‘Kafkaesque’,” *The Atlantic*, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/01/what-it-really-means-to-be-kafkaesque/283096/>

hope to encounter some unknowable interpretation of my own self-identity. Importantly, my use of Alex as a Kafkaesque example highlights (a) the primacy of the example in Žižek's writing and (b) Žižek's philosophical delineation between the idealist and materialist positions. Film theorist Matt Flisfeder outlines the two positions in relation to Žižek's use of the example in film: for the *idealist*, "examples are always imperfect, they never perfectly render what they are supposed to exemplify, so that we should take care not to take them too literally." For a materialist, however, "there is always more in the example than in what it exemplifies, i.e., an example always threatens to undermine what it is supposed to exemplify since it gives body to what the exemplified notion itself represses, it is unable to cope with." To put this simply, the materialist position corresponds with locating pleasure in our deadlock and then circulating around the object with the hope that enough encounters will uncover something that was previously inaccessible to us. In such terms, by reflexively binding my own understandings and interpretations, fantasies and desires, between, against, and through Žižek and Kubrick, my analysis of *A Clockwork Orange* becomes truly Kafkaesque.

But how might we imagine these moments in relation to our own use of reflection as teachers? The circularity and unknown of the paratactic method, in its simplest form, represents the moments we have to look twice in order to see the things that appear right before our eyes. Each time we double back and encounter ourselves against the object, it simultaneously signals our end and our beginning. This dialectic represents more than Žižek's compulsive return to the example, it is the rhythm that sustains the methodic madness of the Žižekian lens providing a unique pedagogical horizon to teacher education and lens of analysis in the philosophy of education. As a return to the negativity at the heart of everything we have explored, the paratactic method opens the reflexive space to engage with the alienation at the core of our being

(negative ontology) and overcome our false understandings of self—whether these are internal (e.g. the fantasy structure) or external (e.g. the Symbolic/big Other).

This final chapter is written in the spirit of Žižek and Kubrick’s work as a challenge to the standard way we view the function and logical pathways of an academic text. It is intended to be read as a conversation between you (the reader) and me, but as I progressively detail my own reflexive journey, I challenge you to imagine your-self within the deteriorating frameworks of the narrative. At its core this text is about the reflexive spaces we exist in during the methodological act of reflection itself, but these spaces are largely void of meaning if you fail to imagine the *cost of being* in such spaces. The importance of each pathway detailed in this chapter is thus not some form of subjective destination but the reflexive process of stumbling upon the belief in such a destination to begin with. If we are consider Žižek or Kubrick’s work as the question itself, how might you consider this text as a question that forces you to interrogate your own self-identity in relation to my descriptions of reflexive possibility and failure? That is to say, how do consider what is presented in this chapter not as an answer but as a question that starts you on your path of discovery?

### **A Clockwork Orange as Reflexive Space**

Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation of Anthony Burgess’ novella *A Clockwork Orange*<sup>23</sup> is a cinematic cacophony of “ultraviolence” that critically examines the perverse hypocrisy of modern society. Using the film as a narrative and conceptual framework, this methodological oeuvre formulates a series of unlikely and disquieting parallels between Alex—the story’s primary antagonist—and my own enunciations of being as a subject and teacher within the apparatuses of

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<sup>23</sup> Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*. 1st American ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

school(ing) and the larger structures of our modern socio-Symbolic culture. The importance of Kubrick's *reading* of Burgess' novella<sup>24</sup> is uncovered both in his transmogrify of the narrative itself and the disorientating re-presentations that only come into existence through his cinematic lens. To place this narrative frame under further distress, Kubrick's reading of violence is read again through Žižek's interpretive lens—constructing the title's formulaic structure *Kubrick avec Žižek*. What emerges is a disquieting and unrelenting narrative that unveils an inherently antagonistic and violent subjective and structural edifice. By situating myself—as a veteran teacher and administrator in a large midwestern city—aside Alex, I develop an increasingly disruptive reflexive frame aimed at permanently effacing my assumptive and fantasmatic positionality in ways similar to Kubrick and Žižek.

The importance of this framework is highlighting and uncovering our subjective inability to understand reality; that is to say, our own misrecognition of self-identity as teacher in relation to reality itself—the Lacanian registers of the Symbolic, Imaginary, and the Real. However, our *a priori* misrecognition of reality cannot be easily undone. By blurring my own understanding of self (as teacher-subject) against my understanding of self qua Alex—as the film's antihero and authoritative assailant within Kubrick's exegetical minefield—I am able to create a violent thread to help me find my way through the thicket of unknowing. As each cherished notion of my self-identity falls away, a space opens to reimagine the reflective method and redefine how we understand our teaching in relation to the discourse of education. Without fully disentangling the depth of our lack of understanding, we risk continually misunderstanding the problems we seek to resist and reinforcing the structures that define our alienation.

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<sup>24</sup> I use the term novella as it is how Burgess himself defines the text in the introduction to the 1986 American publication of the book title *A Clockwork Orange: Resucked*.

Set in a dystopian landscape, in a London of the near future, *A Clockwork Orange* is the story of Alex DeLarge whose principle interests are “rape, ultra-violence, and Beethoven”—or “Ludwig van” as Alex likes to refer to him in the film. Alex and his *Droogs*<sup>25</sup> (gang of friends) spend their nights at the Korova Milk Bar getting high on *moloko plus* (milk laced with drugs) before embarking on “a little bit of the old ultraviolence.” While the analysis within these pages focuses on Alex as the narrator, protagonist, and anti-hero, this text is simultaneously about Kubrick, his presentation and our interpretation of this *Thing*—the Lacanian object which both attracts and repels us—that is Alex DeLarge. It is critical to note that the importance of my connection to Alex throughout this analysis is predicated on more than his dominant positionality in the film. As it will become increasingly clear, it is only through Alex that it becomes possible for me reflexively encounter the trauma of Lacanian Real. To reiterate, Alex is the thread that keeps me on my path and makes it possible for me to navigate through Lacan’s triadic structure. While his character may not be immediately present, his spectre looms over every section of this analysis—just as it haunted my reflections.

Because this journey is based on an encounter with my own misrecognition of self-identity, it is necessarily circuitous and multifarious, starting and stalling, before doubling back on itself and splintering in unforeseen directions. Much like the paratactic method itself, my reflexive journey toward the Real lacked clarity and obvious direction. But regardless of how many times this research stalled and/or splintered in unimaginable directions, Alex lingered in my psyche as a haunting spectre (or Lacanian *Thing*) disrupting my understanding of self in relation to the film and my sense of being in the world. In Kubrick’s own view of Alex, he notes

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<sup>25</sup> Nadsat, Russian for ‘teen’, is the invented slang in which Alex narrates his experiences. In addition to the Russian influence, Nadsat is derived from a number of other sources: Romany; Cockney rhyming slang; the language of the 1950’s English criminal underworld; the English of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans; armed forces slang; and the Malay language familiar to Burgess (from anthonyburgess.org).

“there is a basic psychopathological, unconscious identification” with him. He is a creature we unconsciously connect with the uncontrollable portion of our psyche. In most cases, according to Kubrick, “this recognition seems to bring a kind of empathy from the audience, but it makes some people very angry and uncomfortable.”<sup>26</sup>

Given the nature of Kubrick’s presentation of Alex, it is likely that we know nothing of the experiences he portrays off the screen. Alex’s actions throughout the first Act of the film represent, in Žižekian terms, *subjective violence*. Paul Taylor describes subjective or interpersonal violence as “what we common-sensically”<sup>27</sup> understand as the very notion of violence. It is easily recognizable, witnessable, and carried out by a “clearly identifiable agent.”<sup>28</sup> This description can, of course, easily be applied to what we witness in Alex, thereby accounting for why we as people, a society of human beings, might recoil in the face of the violence portrayed in *A Clockwork Orange*. We recoil at the way Alex’s action take form and how they assault our senses with their graphicness and obscenity. But what about the other side of this perverse coin? When we examine ourselves and the quiet moments when we believe we are beyond the judgmental gaze of society, how often are we (un)consciously fascinated by lure of subjective violence? Are we not held captive by the ten o’clock news when they tease us with a story about the murder of a teenage girl or the abduction of a child? Do these same stories not function as ‘click bait’ on the internet?

As a social studies teacher, I am well aware that the most violent and grotesque lessons garner the highest levels engagement from my students. Using the syllabi as their guide, my students’ anticipation for our discussion on the world wars (history) or serial killers (psychology)

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<sup>26</sup> Stanley Kubrick, Philip Strick and Penelope Houston, “Modern Times: An Interview with Stanley Kubrick,” in *Stanley Kubrick: Interviews*, ed. Gene D. Phillips (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2001) 129.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Taylor, *Žižek and the Media* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2010) 120.

<sup>28</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).



far outweighs any other topics. Nonetheless, there is something about Alex which functions as a constant barrier for many spectators. According to Michael Herr, one of Kubrick's collaborating writers post-*A Clockwork Orange*, Kubrick was very intentional in exploring human pathology in his films, including Carl Jung's concept of the *shadow*—that which represents the dark side of human nature.<sup>29</sup> For Kubrick, *A Clockwork Orange* represented this shadow, “man isn't a noble savage. He is irrational, brutal, weak, unable to be objective about anything where his interests are involved.”<sup>30</sup> While it is easy to draw a line from Kubrick's presentation of Alex to societal issues of subjective violence, perhaps the disgust we express in relation to Alex is a mask we use to prevent our own encounter with some-thing that lurks within us. From this position, when Kubrick describes his own intentions as allowing the spectator to “see violence from Alex's point of view, to show it was great fun for him, the happiest part of his life, and that it was like some great action ballet,”<sup>31</sup> I began to ask, how does my response to this presentation of Alex uncover my own understanding of self—my own irrationality, brutality, and weakness? The pathway forward as such was not to recoil in the face of violence, but to embrace it at the core of my being. But how do we isolate our-self in relation to the violence presented on a screen? How do we come to understand these temporal moments of interconnectedness as glimpses into our own shadow nature?

Interestingly, despite the seemingly overt storyline of the film, both Burgess and Kubrick have stated that *A Clockwork Orange* is *not* about violence. “The book isn't really about violence,” according to Burgess, “it's about the curing of violence. That's what the mechanical title suggests: a mechanical inflexible system imposed on a juicy, organic whole.” Burgess

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<sup>29</sup> Julian Rice, *Kubrick's Hope: Discovering Optimism from 2001 to Eyes Wide Shut*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> Stanley Kubrick and Michel Ciment, *Kubrick: The Definitive Edition* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2001) 122.

<sup>31</sup> Laurent Bouzereau, *Ultraviolet Movies: From Sam Peckinpah to Quentin Tarantino* (Secaucus, N.J: Carol Publishing. Group, 1996) 29.

viewed the lesson of book as a warning about state sanctioned violence being used as a regressive technique to snuff out violence itself. Kubrick extends Burgess' sentiment remarking, "the central idea of the film has to do with the question of free-will. Do we lose our humanity if we are deprived of the choice between good and evil?"<sup>32</sup> In the comments, both Kubrick and Burgess are largely referencing the second act of the film which documents Alex's imprisonment and rehabilitation via the Ludovico Technique—an experimental form of aversion therapy the state offered Alex in return for a commuted prison sentence. But this of course does not mean that the film (or novella) is *not* about violence but that Kubrick and Burgess did not interpret their message as such.

For me, the film is about nothing but violence. This interpretive disjunction highlights the pedagogical possibility of the paratactic method. While Kubrick may have intended for one line of reasoning to emerge from the film, my own interpretation has spiraled in another direction. But if I were to frame this under the guise of a lesson plan—given all of the assumptions, expectations, etc. that we (as teachers) (un)consciously write into our lessons—would 'Mr. Kubrick' hope for a similar outcome? As a student of Mr. Kubrick, I was presented with a 'unit' of information (the film); this information is our content and how to expect students to arrive at a positioning of knowing or understanding. As a student, I studied and analyzed that information to produce a new real-world application, but my conclusion was different than what my teacher intended? At risk of overly simplifying matters, whether or not we are comfortable with this process as a teacher is often largely dependent on how I view my-self in relation to knowledge. This, of course, is a well-worn research topic in education. However, it also highlights the risk of the paratactic method. In order for you to traverse the gap between A and C and define B in

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<sup>32</sup> Stanley Kubrick and Michel Ciment, *Kubrick: The Definitive Edition* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2001) 122.

itself, I (the teacher) must provide you (student) with the theoretical groundwork to make these movements possible. If am unclear, even for the sake of the method itself, then the entirety of this project (lesson) is failure.

The resulting deadlock in this scenario is different than the Kafkaesque frustration, described in the preceding, in a critical way. As a reader of Kafka, the frustration I experience occurs after he has established the theoretical constellation of his world—i.e. after learning has occurred or I arrive at point C. While the deadlock I experience remains frustrating, I am capable of thinking what might exist beyond C but can never arrive at a destination. If, however, the deadlock occurred at point A, then the book or the lesson is a failure in the sense that it is failed to convey the basic coordinates necessary for us to understand its structure. This is the danger and possibility of the paratactic method. As teachers we cannot tell our students what reality exists beyond C because any such formulation is entirely subjective/paratactic, but we can help to ensure they have a basic framework to gaze out into the abyss.

Returning to my own interpretation of the film as being about nothing but violence, by embracing the seemingly unrestrained violence of the film, it became possible for me to imagine violence as a multifaceted concept I could leverage to uncover otherwise inaccessible pieces of my own ontological being. In Žižek's analysis of violence, he cautions that it is necessary to step back and view violence from a critical distance to avoid the horrifying lure of its imagery. Within this space, he notes, it becomes possible to gain a proper sense of what is actually occurring around us.<sup>33</sup> What Žižek is referencing here is how our—both on a personal and societal level—horror and fascination with highly visible incidents of subjective violence prevent us from

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<sup>33</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).

noticing objective violence; the violence which is built into the systems that function as a self-fulfilling metaphysical dance that runs the show.<sup>34</sup>

Broadly, I would argue that Žižek's analysis of violence encapsulates the overall approach to the methodology of this paper in two distinct ways. First, engaging in countless conversations with academics, cinephiles, and coffeehouse combatants, I have found most spectators of the film become lost in the aesthetics of Alex's actions and fail to (or are unwilling to) see any other context with which to view each increasingly egregious act. Secondly, in a more foundational sense, by focusing on violence itself, this text strives to draw attention to the complex interplay between subjective and systemic violence. The interconnectedness of these elements, according to Žižek, have a profound effect on us but are largely invisible to the ideologically acclimatized eye:

Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. Systemic violence is thus something like the notorious 'dark matter' of physics, the counterpart to the all-too-visible subjective. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seems to be irrational explosions of subjective violence.<sup>35</sup>

The uncovering of this systemic violence is indicative of the main thread linking Burgess and Kubrick, systemic violence must be considered if we are to make sense of the otherwise inexplicable eruptions of subjective violence we experience through Alex. However, in my own methodological analysis of self-identity against and through the film, I re-frame this reading of violence in few small but critical ways.

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<sup>34</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008) 2.

## **Scaffolding**

The cumulative impact of these elements would seem to suggest that developing a reflexive framework would necessitate, following Žižek, distancing ourselves from subjective violence in order to gain a proper perspective. To begin, however, I counter that we must immerse ourselves completely in it in order to fully understand the pervasiveness objective violence has on the zero-level standard against which we must perceive all things. I use the term subjective violence here both as a reference to the intersubjective acts of violence we witness through Alex and as an enunciation of a self-inflicted form of violence I imagine as the necessary drive of this reflexive process. That is to say, the ‘method’ of teacher reflection I seek to describe is violent in that it is act intended to create distress by destabilizing the way we exist in the world. It is violent in its irrational function as an act against our stable understandings of reality, its violence is a function of creating progressively uncomfortable and disruptive moments of reflexive articulation from which we cannot retreat. With each violent iteration, we move closer toward disrupting systemic violence by gaining a greater understanding of our misrecognition self being in reality.

At a recent administrative workshop, I was surprised when a local superintendent of schools spoke about the emphasis she placed on reflection with her teachers and administrators. I was surprised in the sense that reflection seems to have fallen out of favor in many (or most) schools. While it still remains a box to be completed at the bottom of our lesson plans or an exercise to be finished before our post-observation meetings, many schools treat reflection as a ‘task’ we have already accomplished. In her presentation, however, she noted how important it was to ensure the reflective process is perceived as “non-threatening” to the staff and that no one

is made to feel “uncomfortable.” It is precisely in response to this type of sentiment in education that I imagine the violence of this reflexive method. In our conversation following the workshop, I asked her if she believed we can ever truly understand who we are or change the fundamental nature of our actions without threatening our comfort? If we allow ourselves to always remain comfortable, will we ever truly change? Within our classrooms, do we allow for any such comfort or do we believe it is necessary to push our students beyond what they perceive as their limits?

In the analysis that follows, I outline the necessity of violence in my own reflexive journey toward some-thing akin to temporal transformation. The movements necessitate violence because we are acting irrationally, are striking out against our commonly held understandings, we are disrupting the patterns of knowing and being that allow us to experience reality with minimal discomfort. Each reflexive movement is an irrational act of violence because it requires me to act against what I (un)consciously perceive as my own best interests and, as I will demonstrate, the structures that regulate and delineate the coordinates of my daily reality.

### **Reflection and Lacan’s Triad of the Unconscious**

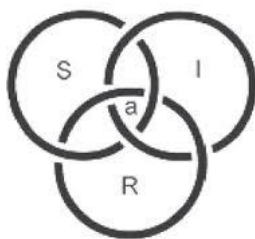


Figure 4.1: Jacques Lacan, Borromean knot, Seminar XXII, 1974.

As a way of navigating the complexity of this analysis, each reflective movement is roughly separated into one of Lacan's triadic registers of the unconscious psyche—the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real. While this framing separates the registers from one another, allowing each to be outlined and interpreted as an isolated form, Lacan viewed them as permanently entangled—as illustrated in the diagram above (Figure 4). Lacan's topology of the subject based on the Borromean knot allows us to outline and articulate our existence through multiple pathways and modes of analysis. As a base formulation of the triadic structure, the Real corresponds to the unknown abyss of our existence or that which exists outside of the Symbolic. The lack at the core of the subject's being is the Symbolic (big Other), and the Imaginary corresponds to the way we mask this lack as a way of maintaining our ontological consistency. What Lacan's Borromean structure allows us think, beyond basic theoretical definitions of temporal space is, (a) how the intersectional moments of our existence correspond to different orders and (b) how the intersections of each order corresponds to unconscious moments of our existence.

It is within these intersections that it becomes possible to uncover and analyze different aspects of our subjectivity. For example, when the Real is in proximity of the Imaginary we experience anxiety. This feeling of anxiety is created because the trauma we experience when we encounter the Real threatens to disrupt our Imaginary view of a stable reality. Thus, anxiety (beyond basic stress) can be understood as the beginning stages of experiencing the trauma of the Real. It is for similar reasons that Žižek warns, the Real is repressed for a reason. Or, from an inverse perspective, the Real does not exist, *it insists*—a traumatic kernel of our subjective identity that is thoroughly immanent to our Imaginary-Symbolic reality in that it cannot be imagined or symbolized. Using this basic topological structure, each of the proceeding reflexive

acts attempts to articulate a basic diagnosis of the space from which it emanates while progressively moving toward a traumatic encounter with the Real.

### **Framing- ACT I: The Symbolic**

Most often introduced within the realm of language, the Symbolic order or big Other structures our everyday understanding of reality by providing the words we use to describe our subjective experience(s), ourselves, and our world. The Symbolic is what is grasped through language operating completely through differential relations—for example, a ‘desk’ is a ‘desk’ because it is not everything else. This same function plays out in the way the Symbolic structures the identities we take up as our own within society. For example, the Symbolic identity of who I am—American, teacher, parent, etc.—provides (a) a way for me to locate my-self as existing in the world and (b) a sense of my self-identity without having to create it from nothing. Throughout the process of becoming a subject, these identities are prepackaged for me and I am able to (un)consciously see myself realized in their Symbolic molds. Although no Symbolic identity fits me exactly—I never feel, for example, like I completely embody what it means to be a teacher—I never experience the pure alienation of identity either. My imaginary sense of self (i.e. fantasies belonging to the realm of the Imaginary) covers up this gap.

In this section, I articulate various theoretical examples of the Symbolic and reflexively articulate a vision/version of my self-identity in and through these formulations. As a way of disrupting their function and moving beyond our commonly held understandings of Symbolic structures, I introduce the Lacanian concept of the *gaze* through Kubrick’s presentation of the character Alex. The importance of the gaze as a point of analysis is how Kubrick problematizes the particularities of our perspective and intentions, forcing us to pay attention to their impact on



our identities and our anonymous sense of being. In a broader sense, the gaze complicates the notion of how we see and understand ourselves in relation to the world. From this perspective we again encounter the central theme of this thesis: the way we perceive some-thing (ourselves, a lesson, a problem) is the problem itself.

While the full necessity of Alex's character may not be immediately apparent in this first Act of reflexive analysis, the importance his character gains increasing clarity as I navigate through the registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic. What this again highlights is the basic idea that we are not intended to (intentionally) encounter the Real. Because of this, we need help to reflexive reach into the darkest, depths of our understanding

### **Framing- ACT II: The Imaginary**

If we broadly understand the Symbolic as that which supports and regulates the visible world, the Imaginary order obscures the power of Symbolic order in shaping our identity and masking the lack (i.e. my alienation) created by its inability to do so completely. The Imaginary, as such, consists of the fantasies which support our existence, covering up the gaps in our understanding of the world. In so doing, the imaginary provides an illusion of completeness (subjective wholeness) in both ourselves and what we perceive as reality. Lacan's use of the term thus plays on both meanings we commonly associated with the term: the Imaginary it is at once visual and illusory. The way we experience the Imaginary register is most often its work to conceal the function of the other registers that our constitutive of experience—i.e. the Symbolic and the Real.

In this section, I further explore the notion of the gaze to disrupt our foundational understanding of self-identity and being in reality. By repeatedly shifting our understanding of

self in relation to Alex it becomes possible to bring our fantasies out of the shadows and attain previously unknown insights into our perceptions of reality. When we uncover pieces of ourselves that were always-already present but obscured from our direct understanding, we begin to see fragments of our self-identify emerge and fail in unexpected ways. Within the Imaginary, we begin to see the possibility of disrupting the stability of our ontic horizon and dislodging our subjective frame from both the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

### **Framing- ACT III: The Real**

Lacan's third register of experience, the Real, is the hardest to explain. The Real marks the point of failure for the subject's look (understanding of self in the world) and the Symbolic's explanatory power to order the world.<sup>36</sup> According to Sheehan, Žižek encourages a thinking of the Real as, "the primordial level of naked, amorphous materiality, that which is 'really' there, unprocessed, underneath or behind the symbolic patterning which accounts for the matrix of representations that we call reality."<sup>37</sup> In such terms, consciousness itself must be understood as a barrier to accessing or understanding the Real.<sup>38</sup> But, at the same time, the Real paradoxically represents the full potentiality of our consciousness. The Real is a change in perspective that produces a different way of looking at, experiencing, and understanding reality.<sup>39</sup>

By stressing the importance of the Real, Lacan did not proclaim to offer a pathway to escape the alienation of language or the possibility of identifying what is really actual; instead, he affirmed that the Real marks the inherent limitations of language itself. That is to say, the

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<sup>36</sup> Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> Sean Sheehan, *Žižek: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (New York: Continuum, 2012) 25.

<sup>38</sup> Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991).

inability of language to say it all or speak any whole truth. Thus, to tarry with the Real is to understand that no matter how violent the assertion of the Symbolic ideology, for example, our indoctrination can never be completed without a hitch. What we see then is the importance of reflexively grasping at the Real as it is an indication of the incompleteness of the Symbolic. Every ideology, discourse, etc., for example, includes a point within its existing structure that it cannot account for or represent. This is the point of the Real at which our understanding of the Symbolic opens up from the outside by marking the vulnerability of Symbolic orders (again ideology, etc.).

Throughout the entirety of this analysis, I methodically work through each of Lacan's registers in attempt to reach the traumatic Real capable of disrupting the fantasies that obscure the authority of the big Other (Symbolic). This is a methodologically violent assertion toward self-knowing dependent on my own ability to recognize and embrace the points at which my identity breaks down. These points of failure are located through and against Alex. By focusing on various aspects of his character, the juxtaposition of self against his frame creates a space where we lose the ability to distance ourselves from the trauma of our ontological being. While films can lull the spectator into a dreamlike, fantasmatic netherworld, causing the subject to become lost deeper within the realm of Symbolic ideology,<sup>40</sup> they also open up the possibility for an encounter with the trauma of the Real that disrupts the power of present understandings. Films, as such, can relocate the spectators sense of being in relation to their Symbolic identity, reconfiguring what it means to look at ourselves and the prevailing systems that structure our reality. In this sense, the violence of each traumatic encounter with Alex represents the Real and our unrestrained reflexive potentiality. This trauma is the possibility of freedom, a freedom that

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<sup>40</sup> Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

is at once a horrifying and a liberating release from the Symbolic constraints and fantasmatic illusions that support our daily existence.

Across each of the three acts I focus on ontological being in relation to the reflexive space I seek to navigate in understanding my own self-identity. This follows Žižek's claim that "those who think ontologically have to err ontologically;"<sup>41</sup> meaning, what appears as the gap between theory and practice, for example, is also the gap we must navigate between the Symbolic and the Real. This gap, he argues, can be defined with the word trauma because understanding our being in relation to each register is perceived as a traumatic encounter and navigating the gap—between the Symbolic and the Real—entails a loss of reality. For this reason, the reflexive movements outlined in this analysis can be understood as a traumatic or violent loss of our ontological horizon. But within the violence of the reflexive act itself, we are momentarily exposed to the raw ontic thing that is not yet screened by our fantasies, misrecognitions, etc, that is the Real of our being.<sup>42</sup> This is the trauma of the Real or the moment we encounter the kernel of our self-identity stripped of all its extemporaneous bullshit and false understandings. By highlighting the possibilities of ontological knowing and the ontological autonomy that is always-already present in the spaces of our reflection but often missed (or ignored), this text seeks to problematize our common-sense understanding(s) of education, teacher education, and the philosophy of education as primarily an epistemological concern.

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<sup>41</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008) 98.

<sup>42</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008).

## ACT 1: There was me, that is Alex

As the opening credits of *A Clockwork Orange* abruptly end and the stark monochromatic red background vanishes (see Figure 4.1), Kubrick confronts us with an image of Alex straightaway.



Figure 4.2: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.



Figure 4.3: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

Alex, our “humble narrator” as he references himself, is our portal into the film.

There was me, that is Alex, and my three *Droogs*, that is Pete, Georgie, and Dim, and we sat in the Korova Milk Bar trying to make up our *rassoodocks* (mind) what to do with the evening. The Korova milkbar sold milk-plus, milk plus *vellocet* (amphetamine) or *synthemesc* (synthetic mescaline) or *drencrom*

(unknown drug), which is what we were drinking. This would sharpen you up and make you ready for a bit of the old ultra-violence.

These words are paired with Alex's adversarial and sardonic gaze that directly meets the camera, establishing an intimate relationship between Alex and the spectator. We will experience everything with Alex, he shapes our perceptions, controls what is seen, and how it is understood in this world. Robert Kolker notes, when a filmic character stares at the spectator it has the effect of attaching the spectator more firmly to the character. The illusion of the camera's gaze is that it stands for the eye of the character thereby becoming the 'I' of the two subjects (character and spectator). This becoming creates a privileged space of seeing and knowing. When the character and spectator merge, the fictional world is constituted for both as a whole.<sup>43</sup> How this world is constituted is not unlike how we understand ourselves in relation to the Symbolic register. Our understanding of the Symbolic is comprised of (un)conscious, intersubjective networks that are constitutive of all meaning. Although we may not be aware of its presence, the big Other is always working to define the coordinates of our existence.

In its most basic form the Symbolic register accounts for how I understand myself in relation to the world. This is not how I perceive reality (which is the function of the Imaginary) but how I understand—or more accurately know—and organize myself in relation to other objects, people, structures, etc. The primary way we navigate this space is through language but because language cannot be private, meaning is always intersubjective. More specifically, it exists in the Symbolic order—i.e. the Lacanian big Other. The Symbolic, in its most basic form, gives us a sense of how, not only proper names, but the name of every object (signifier) in any common language implies a circular, self-referential tautology. Whether I consider my name *Brian* or my

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 311.

title as a *Teacher*, each name refers to an object because this object is called that. There is no special Brian-ness that exists at the core of my being; rather, I am the object called Brian only because I am not everything else that is not Brian. This impersonal form ('it is called') announces the dimension of the 'big Other' beyond our understanding of self and other subjects.<sup>44</sup>

In a much more direct form, we (un)consciously posit the Symbolic as a kind of existing entity or big Other aware of what we are doing, capable of addressing my every action. Because Kubrick's presentation of Alex is manifested as a similar function, we can begin to see how our own misrecognitions of self are impacted by the Symbolic register through Alex. In similar terms, I began to ask myself, how does my understanding of self in relation to Alex raise questions about the connection between my subjective understanding of self-identity and my-self in relation to other objects? How does this questioning then inflect upon my understanding of reality as a whole? According to Žižek, the actuality of life is "structured by reference to symbolic fictions," such that any examination of the Real involves a reflexive intervention he calls "*tarrying with the negative*."<sup>45</sup> Tarrying with the negative represents a shift in our reflexive perspective. It is a willingness to (a) consider that our understandings of reality might be structured by some-thing beyond our recognition, (b) accept that we are objects in the world that lack the specialness we believe defines us, and (c) forgo the comfort and stability we experience as our daily reality. Tarrying with the negative, as such, is a reflexive wallowing in the manifest alienation of the Real that allows us to unthink the false stability we experience in the Symbolic.

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<sup>44</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

<sup>45</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, rev. ed (New York; London: Routledge, 2001), 53.

## Framing Frames

By tarrying with negative, we can begin to see the importance of constantly shifting our reflexive perspective. We might ask ourselves, how does Alex inflect upon our understanding of self in relation to both the film and our self-identity? How is this complicated by the difficulty we experience fully interpreting objects in the world? With an emphasis on perspective, Kubrick's use of Alex and his gaze can be contextualized as 'framing' what is being seen and understood in relation to the film. The use of the term framing, in academic discourse, is both accepted with little question and serves a flash point for endless debates about our biases as researchers, what is, and is not, included in our field of inquiry. In such terms, how I framed this dissertation, for example, refers to my research design, my integrations of various theoretical traditions and methodological frameworks, and my guiding motivations and purposes. At its most basic, we might interpret this use of the term frame as how and why some-thing is presented. If my bias is not (un)consciously recognized by readers, it may be because the research frame is deeply ingrained in structural, academic, and popular discourses—thereby reifying systems of objective violence. As a teacher, these structural discourses are translated and internalized to create a set of idealized images and definitions that create a particular view of self and reality. Deborah Britzman argues that these images are myths that “valorise the individual and make inconsequential the institutional constraints which frame the teacher’s work.”<sup>46</sup> Britzman further notes that these discourses serve as the “frame of reference”<sup>47</sup> for a teacher’s

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<sup>46</sup> Deborah Britzman, “Cultural Myth in the Making of a Teacher: Biography and Social Structure in Teacher Education,” *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(4) (1986), 448.

<sup>47</sup> Deborah Britzman, “Cultural Myth in the Making of a Teacher: Biography and Social Structure in Teacher Education,” *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(4) (1986), 443.



self-image creating a critical link between knowing and being within the lived realities of the everyday classroom.

Similarly, as a teacher, how I frame the content I teach has dramatic implications on how it will be interpreted by my students. Student involvement and understanding, conformity and deviation, all depends on how I set guidelines and expectations, or the frame that relates lessons and content to the reality my students (and my own) experience in my classroom. What I often miss, however, is how my writing is an act of teaching. In this sense, this dissertation represents an-other classroom for me. From the outset, I entered into this space wanting to convey to others the possibilities of the Žizekian lens in education and, in a very pragmatic sense, this dissertation is a terse teaching of that framework. Having spent the past thirteen years in K-12 education, either as a teacher or administrator, I often view the time when I am ‘in school’ as my teaching and my writing as ‘academic’ work. What is most interesting about this (un)conscious understanding of my-self is how often I write against this narrative in my academic work and how vehemently I protest this idea at academic conferences. Yet, I seem to subscribe to this belief in my lived reality as a teacher/academic/scholar.

Each of these frames simultaneously represents the function of the Symbolic and how our own misrecognitions prevent us from observing how it structures our lives. Each failure brings into question how we understand ourselves in relation to all things around us; my-self in relation to you, education, Alex, or the big Other that pulls the strings in our daily reality? But understanding how we frame some-thing or why we respond in certain ways to particular frames is a perilous, complex, and intensely subjective negotiation. As a way problematizing our notion of framing as ‘*how*’ something is presented, Žižek’s analysis of art and the act of framing raises the question of ‘*where*’ an object of analysis is presented.

Following Kojin Karatani's use of the term bracketing,<sup>48</sup> Žižek notes, an object is elevated to the status of art as a response to the question “where” is it is presented—<sup>49</sup> not how or why something is art. Using Malevich's Black Square (see Figure 4.4) and Duchamp's Fountain (see Figure 4.5) as examples, each is an answer to why something is called art that exemplifies how the substance of art is not an inherent property of the object itself.



Figure 4.4: Kazimir Malevich, Black Square, 1915. Moscow, Tretyakow Gallery.



Figure 4.5: Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917. London, Tate Modern.

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<sup>48</sup> Kōjin Karatani, *Transcritique on Kant and Marx* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2003).

<sup>49</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

According to Žižek, “It is the artist himself who, by preempting the (or, rather, any) object and locating it at a certain place makes it a work of art.”<sup>50</sup> What Malevich’s minimalist disposition of a black square on a white canvas does, in its simplicity, for example, renders the place as such. In Žižekian terms, the work of Malevich and Duchamp represent the emergence of *excremental objects* that are out of place or are outside the coordinates of the Symbolic register. Inversely, the presence of each is correlative to the emergence of a reflexive space without an object. The art of Malevich and Duchamp, as such, can be read as disrupting how society defined high art by opening a space for otherness within a previously foreclosed system of thinking.

How can we begin to think of ourselves as excremental objects within the field of education? If we abandon our belief in some intrinsic specialness (inherent property) that exists within us, that is an answer to why we are called teachers, can we begin force ourselves into the narrative in previously unimaginable places? If we begin to imagine our reflective spaces as deprived of any fantasy objects that fill out the incompleteness in our sense of being, is it possible—if even for a moment—to can create something from nothing, a reflexively space outside the coordinates of the Symbolic? How can we begin to imagine teacher reflection as an empty frame or a black square, void of fantasmatic possibilities, capable of transforming any object—which includes ourselves—into an excremental work of art. Similarly, Žižek’s ultimate point is not about art at all but is another elaborate shell game to get us reconsider the fallibility of our own perceptions. The failure to immediately understand the transcendent importance of a urinal turned art highlights the possibility of the paratactic method or how our framings and interpretations of frames uncover secret links between seemingly monadic elements.

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<sup>50</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 255.

Kubrick's use of the frame powerfully intersects with these spaces to extend and complicate our understandings of "how" something is presented. Returning again to the opening sequence of the film, Kubrick's use of Alex's face to frame the scene functions to (dis)orientate, confront, and control what is being seen, felt, and understood by the spectator. The opening shot, with Alex gazing intently at me, juxtaposed with his narration of the scene using an almost impenetrable slang, establishes a confrontational atmosphere. At the same time, his use of slang and the repeated use of "my brother" when addressing me as the spectator helps to establish an intimate-almost deviant-relationship between Alex and me. Thus, when Alex discusses "making up our *rassoodocks* [minds] what to do with the evening," a piece of me feels like I am one of the Droogs. From the very beginning, Kubrick's use of Alex challenges my understanding of self in space. While Alex's *gaze* in-itself unsettling, the full weight of its instinctual and reflexive force is created by Kubrick's of the gaze to create simultaneously moments of identification and recoil (or even revulsion).

### **Gaze as Symbolic**

As a teacher, I have often imagined reflection as a momentary respite in time where it is possible to withdraw from the strain the job often entails. It is space where I can take a step back and untangle the anxieties I am experiencing about a given lesson or pedagogical technique while trying to understand why I am experiencing each moment as such and articulate a solution to each quandary. Following a similar pathology, I have often imagined the experience of viewing a film as an escape from reality, where I am able to gaze upon the images flickering on the screen and passively observe what is presented before me. In Nathan Andersen's text *Shadow*

*Philosophy*—a philosophical analysis of *A Clockwork Orange*—he provides an exquisite narrative of the seemingly ubiquitous way we (often) believe we interact with films:

Films present us with image and sound. We see things—objects, places, people—moving about, doing things, and interacting. We understand what we see. For the most part, it makes sense to us. We know what the things we see on screen are, or at least what kind of things they are, and the kinds of things they do. We notice, or at least feel, the differences between different styles of camera movement. When moving images from different perspectives are joined together, one after another, we can usually tell when they're meant to suggest a sequence of events, when they're meant to suggest simultaneity, when they belong to different locations, or when they belong together as different perspectives on the same situation.<sup>51</sup>

But for me the spectacular beauty and terror of *A Clockwork Orange* is that the film does not allow for any such distance or comfort. The importance of problematizing such spaces is beginning the process of realizing the way we view a problem is the problem itself. As we continue to question how and where something is presented, it is important to maintain our connection to the Symbolic. How do I understand my-self in relation to these questions and what is helping to shape these understandings? At this first level of reflexive analysis, it necessary to begin questioning whether we truly understand the fundamental nature of any problem or narrative?

As teachers who often feel that a lack of time is an insurmountable burden, it is easy understand why we might feel compelled to address what we perceive as our most immediate need. But if we lack a fundamental understanding of our own self-identity, will we ever truly

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<sup>51</sup> Nathan Andersen, *Shadow Philosophy: Plato's Cave and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2014) 11.

recognize the root causation of any problem in the classroom? Or, will we continually address what appears right before our eyes even though we might unconsciously be responding to the demands of the big Other? In continually trying to see what I have been unable to see throughout my career, I remained focused on my discomforts with *A Clockwork Orange*, using the film as constant reflexive space to disrupt and rupture my self-identity. To reiterate the proceeding, the importance of this constant thread is to provide a point of analysis beyond my-self and a lifeline for when my analysis inevitably spirals out of control.

The central fiber of this thread is the distress I have always experienced through Kubrick's use of Alex's gaze. Since the first time I saw the film, over twenty years ago, Alex's gaze has always been the first image I see when I reflect on the film. According to Andersen, "to see a face is not to see an object...but to witness the gaze of another. The face shows its self deliberately, sets the terms by which it will be seen and encountered."<sup>52</sup> In Alex, we encounter a gaze that invites our own but also clearly establishes the confines of our existence together. While I have evoked the term *gaze* at multiple junctures to this point, I have not defined its usage. This is because of the complexity of its interpretation within Lacanian theory and its extraordinary importance as a part of understanding the subject's constitution—and the frailty and pitfalls of associating with the individual's pursuit of stability. Until now, my usage was largely colloquial, referring to an especially steady and intent look. For Lacan, however, the *look* and the *gaze* are separate. In *Seminar XI*, Lacan defines the gaze as the object of the act of looking, meaning the gaze is no longer on the side of the subject. To formulate this structure, Lacan conceives of an antinomic relation between the gaze and the eye (or scopic drive): the eye which *looks* is on the side of the subject, while the *gaze* is on the side of the object. There is no

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<sup>52</sup> Nathan Andersen, *Shadow Philosophy: Plato's Cave and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2014) 14.

coincidence between the look and gaze, according to Lacan, because “You never look at me from the place at which I see you.”<sup>53</sup> Throughout the remainder of this analysis I will develop a progressively more nuanced reading of the Lacanian gaze. At this juncture, however, it is sufficient to note that when the subject looks at an object, the object is always-already gazing back at the subject, but from the point at which the subject cannot see it.

The importance of introducing the gaze into this analysis is providing a point from which to unhinge our very perception of the world. It is through our eyes that we believe we understand the world around us. We look out into the world to receive and interpret information and know how we exist in the world. When I ask my psychology students to discuss their greatest fears, the loss of sight is inevitably near the top of the list—after, of course, public speaking and death. This is because we unconsciously connect seeing the world to knowing that we exist within it. But what might happen if our understanding of how we perceive the world were disrupted? We have already begun to see how the structures we believe frame our world—i.e. the Symbolic—are not what we perceive them to be. What if perception itself is equally fallible? As teachers when we uphold the modernist logic of school(ing) whereby we im/explicitly tell our students: there is a reality out there to be found and “we” (teachers) can teach “you” (students) a language to accurately represent it, where precisely are we gaining this knowledge?

As a way forward, I examine the historical arc of theories and (mis)interpretation of the Lacanian gaze in psychoanalytic film theory as a way threading together my own analysis of self in relation to *A Clockwork Orange*. This thread provides a fertile groundwork for rupturing my understanding of the Symbolic register and development of progressively violent (self-destructive) positions of reflexive mediation. The importance of such intervention is not only to

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<sup>53</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1964, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977) 103.

provide a platform for you to begin questioning your own self-identity, but, in a much broader context, it is a question about what happens when we begin to accept that there is no big Other to sustain our identity? What happens to notions of self, teaching, and education, if we are forced to confront both a self and reality that is radically incomplete? The loss of the big Other would function as a kind of ontological catastrophe. But would this catastrophe mark the end or the beginning? If we lost it all, would it become possible to begin the construction of a radically new identity—even if we cannot grasp this identity at the moment?

### **Disrupting the Symbolic**

The first time I saw *A Clockwork Orange* and encountered Alex's gaze, I experienced it as threatening and over-bearing. On a cursory level, this feeling is akin to Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological analysis of 'the look.' For Sartre, the gaze is what permits the subject to realize the other is also a subject.<sup>54</sup> Early in Lacan's career, he was in general agreement with Sartre but added that a state of anxiety comes with the awareness that one can be viewed.<sup>55</sup> The psychological effect, upon realizing that s/he is a visible object, is that the subject, loses a degree of autonomy—a formulation largely contained within Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. In his reading of Lacan, Todd McGowan concisely summarizes the mirror stage in the following terms:

Infants acquire their first sense of self-identity (the formation of the ego) through the experience of looking in a mirror and relating to their bodies. For Lacan, this experience metaphorically captures a stage in the child's development when the

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<sup>54</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre; *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Lib, 1957).

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Lacan and Jacques-Alain Miller, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. 1st American ed. (New York: Norton, 1988).



child anticipates a mastery of the body she/he lacks in reality. The child's fragmented body becomes, thanks to the way the mirror is read, a whole.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, when a child encounters a mirror s/he encounters the existence of their own external appearance—i.e. their self-identity in reality. Importantly, this appearance is based on *a mastery that does not exist* in reality and a wholeness of self-identity that is created by the illusory effect of a mirror.

According to early Lacanian film theorists, the spectator derives a similar sense of mastery based on the position that the spectator occupies relative to the images/events projected on the screen. This formulation is based almost entirely on Lacan's mirror stage essay, ignoring, as contemporary theorists have demonstrated, Lacan's progressively nuanced and multifaceted reading of the gaze. In his text *The Imaginary Signifier*, Christian Metz likened the experience to the subject's belief in the attainment of mastery of the self and the visual field it does not possess: "The spectator is absent from the screen as perceived but also present there and even 'all-present' as perceiver."<sup>57</sup> According to Metz, being absent as perceived and present as perceiver allows the spectator to escape the sense of real absence that characterizes life outside of the cinema. Following Metz, the way I experience a film thus produces an imaginary pleasure—repeating that of the mirror stage—because the film has the effect of blinding me from understanding my own alienation in the Symbolic order. This view of film leads spectators into self-deception by providing an experience that allows the subject to overcome our temporal sense of lack. For Jean-Louis Baudry, cinematic images act as devices of deception, luring the

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<sup>56</sup> Todd McGowan, "Introduction," in *Lacan and Contemporary Film Theory*, ed. Todd McGowan and Shelia Kunkle (New York: Other Press, 2004) 1.

<sup>57</sup> Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982) 54.

spectator deeper into the clutches of the Symbolic apparatus.<sup>58</sup> From such a perspective, we remain unaware of the acts of production that are created by the images presented before us, we buy into their illusion, and believe we have some sense of control over what is being seen on the screen.<sup>59</sup>

At this point we have arrived back at our basic understanding of the function of the Symbolic register but can observe how it plays out on a purely visual level. While we believe we have a basic grasp of the world around us and a sense of control over how we engage with that world, this stability is an illusion. Instead, we are responding to misrecognitions of our world—while unconsciously believing that one day we will gain control over the shape of our existence in the world. Extending from this position, film theorists viewed the task of analysis as combating the illusory mastery of the gaze by elucidating the underlying Symbolic network that the gaze omits. Metz articulates this vision in the following: “any psychoanalytic reflection on the cinema that might be defined in Lacanian terms as an attempt to disengage the cinema-object from the imaginary and to win it for the symbolic, in the hope of extending the latter by a new province.”<sup>60</sup> In short, what was missing in the spectator’s understanding of films was the Symbolic (e.g. ideological) function that is performed; a position which associates the gaze with vision and mastery. The problem, however, is that this reading of the gaze continues to locate vision and mastery on the side of the subject, where no such mastery exists. Thus, before we can reflexively dislocate our own understanding from the Symbolic, it is necessary to grasp the failures of this belief.

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<sup>58</sup> Jean- Louis Baudry, “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (Columbia University Press, 1986) 289.

<sup>59</sup> Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*. SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982) 54.

Returning again to the vulnerability I experienced in Alex's gaze, my understanding of self in relation to Alex intimates I somehow experience myself as a passive representation of the object of the gaze. In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative," Laura Mulvey pushed early Lacanian readings of the gaze, pointing out that the gaze is not general; it is a male gaze personified on the screen. This concept of the male gaze highlighted the asymmetrical nature of power in film. Mulvey writes about the power of the male gaze: "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is stylized accordingly."<sup>61</sup> This notion of the male gaze, according to Simone de Beauvoir, impacts a woman's self-consciousness as the gaze forces her to define herself according to constructs of male desire.<sup>62</sup> From this perspective the gaze becomes a site of power where the gazed upon is transformed into an object (i.e. objectified).

While contemporary film theorists have criticized Mulvey for failing to account for differences among spectators, her analysis powerfully articulates an interconnection between the spectator and the power of the Other as experienced in an imaginary master. In reflecting on myself and my understanding of experiencing Alex's gaze, I became increasingly aware of how often I (un)consciously deployed my own gaze as a teacher in a similar manner. Much like Alex, I invite students into a shared space but always maintain an understanding of the power dynamics that define our space vis-à-vis the gaze. As a veteran teacher, the use of the gaze is often step one in the unspoken manual of classroom management, a process of regulating student's bodies and behavior while minimizing the disruption of a lesson by eliminating the necessity of a verbal exchange. The key to this example is understanding the invasiveness of the

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<sup>61</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative," *Screen*, vol. 16, (Autumn 1975) 11.

<sup>62</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Woman Destroyed* (New York: Putnam, 1969).

gaze on its object and its function such that even when students resist my controlling gaze as their teacher—with rolled or averted eyes, for example—the assumptive power remains within my gaze. Importantly, this brief narrative only represents my interpretation of the gaze. As I have reflected back on the scene, it offers no analysis of my students use of the gaze or my position as a teacher with the larger structures of education. In this way, it precisely exemplifies how I (as a teacher) believe I have mastery over this space (my classroom), but this belief is always just imaginary.

While this formulation harkens to Michel Foucault's theory of power as organizing individuals (subjects) and the spaces we occupy for the (re)production of docile bodies, I will bypass this reading here as it is a theoretical narrative well-traveled in education.<sup>63</sup> Žižek, following Lacan, differs from Foucault with respect to how the gaze accounts for the unity of the subject. Instead of explicitly linking the gaze to power, as Foucault does to explain how we become objects of a penetrative gaze (which has the effect of classifying, normalizing, and correcting us), Žižek theorizes that there is a peculiar interconnectedness between the gaze and the subject such that the gaze is the o/Other for whom I imagine myself performing. While both accounts would seem to be identifying a big Other, "who registers my acts in the symbolic network,"<sup>64</sup> Žižek's reading of the gaze produces more than the systems that normalize judgment and discipline the behavior of the observed.

The gaze, from Žižek's perspective, provides the supposition for the subject's very capacity to act and see her/his action's as worthwhile and making sense. Absent this point of identification, the subject is unable to coordinate an understanding of their self-identity in relation to reality, rendering us unsure of the point of our own actions. In other words, the sense

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<sup>63</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>64</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Class Struggle or Post-Modernism," in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000) 117.

of mastery that was lacking in the mirror phase is found in the big Other. The Symbolic register provides us with a name, the structure of our existence, and now the only sense of mastery I experience in reality. The difficulty of this position is both understanding how we arrived here and imagining how it might be possible to exist in a space that is not here. In an overly simplified way, I am reminded of how often I talk to my students about the meaningless nature of social media. While they experience each ‘like’ as a validation of their identity, ultimately, they are performing a role for Others which they allow to directly impact their understanding of self. As a teacher, largely removed the crushing nature of teenage peer-pressure, it is easy for me to tell my students to ‘stop caring,’ but is this not precisely how Žižek is describing the function of the big Other?

The paradoxical point to consider, which pushes the full boundaries of our understanding of the Symbolic, is Lacan’s emphatic assertion that “there is no big Other [*il n’y a pas de grand Autre*].”<sup>65</sup> The Symbolic order, according to Lacan, is a contingent, fragile, an inconsistent configuration without any *a priori* formal structure to support it. What this means is that presupposing a transcendent “big Other” who supports us, terrorizes us, and simultaneously prohibits us access to it, is a social fiction. Such knowledge forces us to consider what might happen if the big Other were nothing but a perceptual fantasy? What if the big Other is nothing but a temporal construct we created to cover up the gaps in our understanding of self in this world? If there is no big Other, how is it that we remain transfixed within the spectre of the Symbolic?

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<sup>65</sup> Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan (New York: Norton, 1998).

## A Hailing Gaze

Through the process of reflection, I was able to approach this difficult understanding by conceptualizing Alex's gaze as hailing me, his gaze as calling for my attention in response to his whims. Returning to the introduction of this section, we first encounter our own existence as an external object in the Lacanian mirror phase. Even though we perceive our image as complete, this appearance is based on *a mastery that does not exist* in reality. While it is easy to imagine our adult selves as having a mastery that we lacked as a child, we always lack the ability to master our own image. This is why, when we are confronted with ourselves as the objects of the gaze, it creates psychological anxiety, we are confronted with our lack of control over our own visual representation. Alex's hailing gaze allows us to experience this anxiety by disrupting our false sense of mastery. I use the term '*hail*' in reference to Althusser's famous example of *interpellation* where a police officer calls out "Hey You!" For Althusser, interpellation connects individuals (subjects with a lowercase s) to the state (Subject with a capital S) through the act of "hailing." Hailing, in Althusserian terms, is similar to how we have defined the Symbolic, it is the use of language to name customs, the law, and performative gestures encoded in public space.<sup>66</sup>

Following Althusser's example, I became eerily cognizant of this hail at the 2017 Lollapalooza music festival when a group of police officers yelled into a group of concert spectators. Even though I was consciously aware that I had not committed a crime, when I turned in the direction of the police I was racked with fear—as if I was guilty of some crime. When my eyes met the gaze of the police, I felt myself (un)consciously diverting my attention. Similar to how my students divert their eyes when I ask the class a question, it is as if we believe we can

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<sup>66</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

remain invisible—avoiding the hail—if our eyes fail to meet the eyes of the Other. In the days that followed, I returned to the incident often, reminded of teenage years when I likely would have been guilty of some transgression—and would have run from the police instead of simply diverting my eyes. But through the process of repetitious reflection, I was reminded of how frequently my high school teachers addressed us as students in a similar manner or, within a more recent frame, my administration’s use of email to create anxiety in teachers by reprimanding the entire staff for the transgressions of a small minority of teachers.

By transposing Marxist and Althusserian readings onto cinematic spectatorship, film theorists—such as Metz and Baudry, linked the illusory qualities of film to the process through which subjects enter into ideology and become subjected to the constraints of the social order. McGowan highlights how this formulation of the filmic experience functions at the level of the Imaginary reinforcing an illusory subjectivity that fulfills the role of Symbolic register. This illusory sense of being is, at its most fundamental, the production of a particular sense of subjectivity.<sup>67</sup> Žižek, however, extends Althusser’s structure arguing that interpellation consists of two moments that occur simultaneously: 1) a moment of indeterminate guilt and 2) a moment of identification with the structure that supports the hail from public space.<sup>68</sup> To investigate this position, Žižek might ask us, how do we come to recognize ourselves as being hailed? Or, in slightly shifted terms, how does our belief in any cause or particularity of understanding arise? As a teacher, I might practice specific actives (pedagogical techniques, etc.) related to an ideological cause, but how do I come to recognize this cause as my own? Žižek’s answer is not that I have some preexisting good reason or that the cause in some logical ways corresponds to

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<sup>67</sup> Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*. SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

<sup>68</sup> Slavoj Žižek, Slavoj, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*. (London: Verso, 2005).

my deep seeded true interests—although this is excluded in its entirety; rather, my response is to an irrational injunction.<sup>69</sup>

The irrational injunction, in its simplest form, is the groundless authority we follow when obeying a certain custom, habit, or social obligation. Although we are often unsure why we act, we act nonetheless. As teachers, we often announce the dimension of irrational injunction in our last-ditch efforts to maintain classroom discipline through the phrase “because I said so.” No matter how this scenario proceeds from this moment, our lack of power/authority is confirmed: if we could not, we could not, but even if we could—any attesting (to our control) is doomed to function as a denial—a masking of our impotence confirming that we could not do anything. Of course, before we invoke this phrase, we are already (un)consciously aware of the act that it will fail, but we say it anyway. Why? This moment brings us into a confrontation with the full tautology of the Symbolic register.

First, it brings us back to our first enunciation of the Symbolic. Any authority we hope to invoke is based strictly on our position as a teacher and this authority—‘because I said so’—is rendered groundless. There is no authority from this position because the signifier teacher has no meaning as such and there is no big Other to support the authority of this groundless position. We might draw a parallel here between the Symbolic register, my classroom management, and the very notion of *law* in western society as a way of exemplifying this function. The authority of the law is binding because it is the law, or the fundamental authority of the law is solely grounded in the fact that it is the law—i.e. it is the law because ‘they’ said so. The law only functions because we inter-subjectively agree on its terms. Like the police, a teacher can only enforce the rules (laws) of their classroom insofar as they agreed up inter-subjectively (between

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<sup>69</sup> Jodi Dean, *Žižek’s Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006).



students and teacher). When a student no longer submits to this agreement, they expose the absence of the big Other. As teachers, we can levee punishment in a desperate attempt to bring the student ‘back in line,’ but if the student continues to resist we are forced to acknowledge the truth: our rules only ever exist because we said so. In a like manner, if we attempt to reference something beyond the law as the ground for our authority, we must posit something higher, something by which law could be judged. If we use philosophical notions such as reason or morality, we become ensconced within the same tautological form as the notion of the law. That is to say, the ultimate authority of each is grounded in itself: reason authorizes because it is reasonable; morality because it is moral.

This brings us to the other side of the irrational injunction and how understanding its function can uncover how the gaze structures our relations to the act itself—the peculiar interconnectedness between the gaze and the subject such that the gaze is the o/Other for whom I imagine myself performing.<sup>70</sup> While we can see how there is no big Other to support our authority, it is far different to imagine our existence without any structure to support it. Yet, if we force ourselves to reflexively look at this idea from a slightly shifted perspective, we see how readily it becomes apparent. Instead of experiencing the system(s) of education I seek to resist as an abstract bureaucratic apparatus—a myriad of organizations, edicts, presences, and regulations, in my daily reality, I posit the system as a kind of real, existing, entity. In this form, the system is transformed into a ‘big Other’ aware of what I am doing—an enemy capable of assessing my every action. The point here is double. First, it is through my identification in the Symbolic that I posit the entity I understand myself as resisting. This form of the big Other represents the primary point of my misrecognition and integration into the socio-ideological field. Next, we can

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<sup>70</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness: Chronicles of a Year of Acting Dangerously* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2017).

observe how there is no big Other with which I am fighting. The big Other is a perceptual fantasy of social authority for me to resist. The big Other exists as a temporal projection to cover up the gaps in my identity and provide the references points to define who I am.<sup>71</sup>

The big Other is thus nothing other than an intersubjective illusion—that we agree upon and resist in different ways. It is a story that we accept because we want to, or have to, in order to gain a basic understanding of self-identity within the seemingly unknowable abyss of reality. The truth we are forced to encounter in this moment is that all ideas follow the same tautological function as the signifier: the law is only the because it is that, just as I am Brian or a teacher because I am that object and not everything else. When we tear apart the basic fabric of our understanding, there is no greater significance to how we frame and interpret the world. All of our understandings of self, knowledge, ideas, and even our visual understanding of self in the world follow this illusionary framework. All understanding is a social fiction that we subjectively interpret, it can be written, re-written, and un-written. This, of course, is an idea that has been presented to us at least since high school and our first reading of George Orwell, when he writes, for example, “Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.”<sup>72</sup>

But if this is the case, why has it taken me so long to arrive at this position? Why do we not simply break free of the illusion? Perhaps it is fear? Or the pain of liberation? Methodologically, I have started to believe, as a friend recently shared with me, that it is not until “we feel it [the un-method] in our bones” that we are able to understand the depth of possibilities that exists when we think otherwise. What we have watched unfold in the first Act of this research is the emerge of our self-identity as an irrational understanding in itself. I began this

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<sup>71</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>72</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (New York: New American Library, 1983) 33.

process my attempting to understand how I saw my-self being seen by Alex which uncovered the painful realization that I have no control over of my own self-image nor do I fully understand the space created by the interconnectedness of the gaze. This opened a reflexive pathway to consider what I am within the structures that surround me and possibility that if I am not what I perceive myself to be then perhaps the big Other is not what I perceive it to be either. This, however, returns us again to the question, what keeps us within the bounds of the Symbolic register? Why would we not simply step outside of these coordinates and redefine the fabric of our self-identity? The answer is fantasy.

Our navigation and analysis of the Symbolic realm took a considerable amount of space because it required that we (a) examine large swaths information that exist inside and outside of the subject and (b) it allowed us to establish a rhythm of how the Zizekian lens might look when applied directly to a method of reflexively analysis. As we attempt to disrupt the role of fantasy and locate a piece of the Real, the analysis will begin to proceed more quickly because the bulk of the processing is internal, largely lacking references to external structures.

### **Gaze as Imaginary**

Unlike a wish or want, fantasy accounts for our foundational understanding of how we perceive the reality of our daily existence (in the world, in our classrooms, etc.) and why we fail to recognize our alienation in the Symbolic. The fantasies we construct cover up the irreducible trauma of social antagonism and make possible our everyday understanding(s) of reality. Our fantasies are the way things really seem to us but, in actuality, are a mediation between the formal structures of the Symbolic register and the raw material positivity of the objects we encounter in reality. While our fantasies camouflage the Real antagonism and lack that are

always-already present within any system, they simultaneously help us maintain a minimal level of ontological consistency—without which we would experience reality as nothing but pure alienation. *What this mean is that it is not reality that we misrecognize, but rather the fantasies that structure our reality.* In our analysis of the Symbolic, we saw how Lacan’s theory of the mirror phase marked the moment we first experience (or understand) ourselves as existing in reality. Because the imagined image of the infant is not identical to the infant (as an entity in itself) nor is it identical to our external image or reversed image in the mirror, this moment marks subject’s foundational misrecognition of reality. The self-identify we construct in response to this misrecognition is a fantasy marking our slippage into the Imaginary.

Significantly, the process of the mirror phase also accounts for our formation of what Lacan termed the *objet petit a*. The *objet petit a* is an imaginary object which we unconsciously believe, if located, will account for the mastery we lack in reality. For this reason, the *objet petit a* maintains our fantasy because it allows us to maintain the belief that subjective wholeness (or mastery) is possible. Our fantasies, in this way, must be understood as unconsciously including this desire to find a lost object which we never truly lost because any notions of wholeness we maintain are based on a false sense of mastery. At this juncture then it is helpful to frame our misrecognition of self-identity in the following terms: the way I “see myself” is a function of the *Imaginary* and my “self-image” is comprised of features structured by the Symbolic.

To reiterate the preceding formulation of the gaze, early Lacanian film theorists located the gaze in the spectator based on an illusory framework established in the mirror-stage essay—i.e. *I see myself in the Other*. But in focusing on Lacan’s mirror stage to interpret the relationship between the spectator and subject, Joan Copjec points out that early film theorists neglected Lacan’s actual theorization of the gaze. If the subject, for example, is left indefinitely bound up

within the Other's field of view, the end result is the creation of a temporal relationship between the cinematic audience and the cinematic apparatus: "the images presented on the screen are accepted by the subject as its own ...the image seems...to perfectly represent the subject."<sup>73</sup> One of the problems that emerges as a result of such analysis, according to Copjec, is that the analysis focuses on the subject's desire for mastery, where no such mastery exists.<sup>74</sup>

What Copjec is highlighting here is how we remain duped by our belief in visual representations; if we look hard enough at some-thing we will find our way out of the darkness. Without spiraling into the rabbit hole of Marxist critique, this follows standard readings of false consciousness in education, whereby ideology is an epistemological problem (a problem of knowledge). But our encounter with fantasies highlights the failure of the epistemological claim and the ultimate illusion of our resistance: the Symbolic (e.g. ideology) is not simply imposed on the subject, we enjoy our misrecognition (e.g. false consciousness, ideology, etc.)! To put the nature of our fantasies in Marxist terms, there is no liberation from ideology because reality itself is already ideological. When we remain fixated on our belief in visual representations and processes of overcoming our un-knowing, desire—as the desire for mastery—is viewed as an active rather than a passive process: the desiring spectator (subject) actively takes possession of the passive object.

But in his mirror stage essay, Lacan never used the term *le regard* in association with the gaze. As was noted previously, in *Seminar XI*, Lacan stresses that the gaze is of the object, not the subject. Lacan thereby reverses our usual way of thinking about gaze as an active process<sup>75</sup> by structuring the gaze as something the subject (spectator) encounters in the object (film). This

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<sup>73</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) 21, 23.

<sup>74</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>75</sup> Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan*, SUNY Series in Psychoanalysis and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

reversal is more than an explanation of structural topology; instead, according Copjec, it forces us to consider the truly untenable position of Lacan:

Lacan does not ask you to think of a gaze as belonging to an Other who cares about who or where you are, who pries, keeps tabs on your whereabouts, and takes note of all your steps and missteps, as the panoptic gaze is said to do....The horrible truth, revealed to Lacan...is that *the gaze does not see you*. So if you are looking for confirmation of the truth of your being or the clarity of your vision, you are on your own.<sup>76</sup>

Copjec thus brings us to the position we encountered as the failure of the Symbolic through the lens of the gaze. There is no big Other, you are on your own.

But abandoning all notions of being seen by an Other is not quite right either. Žižek contextualizes this formulation within the realm of film noting that the “gaze should not be seen as the action of a subjective being;” rather, gaze refers to the way that the “film’s objects regard the filmgoer.”<sup>77</sup> By reversing the subject and object, Žižek highlights how films may not be subjective but they reveal subjectivity to us by unveiling subjective-life in a filmic mirror. By emphasizing that the subject is the ultimate object of the gaze, we are able to use the filmic mirror to reinforce the disconnection between the gaze and the seeing eye. What this reflexive movement forces us to confront is that the gaze is the ultimate *object of fantasy*. Apropos a scene of fantasmatic ultraviolence from *A Clockwork Orange*, Žižek challenges us to ask ourselves, for which gaze is this scene staged? <sup>78</sup> Or, from a slightly shifted perspective, what subjective narrative is this scene destined to support? As we encounter various formulations of ourselves in

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<sup>76</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) 36.

<sup>77</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>78</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997).

relation to Alex, does the scene allow us to maintain or destruct the fantasies that bind us our Symbolic lack.

### **The Function of Fantasy**

The power of Kubrick's use of the gaze in *A Clockwork Orange* is found in the (un)conscious opportunities the film presents to encounter the breeding ground of our fantasy. Despite the number of times I have viewed the film, it retains the ability to overwhelm my perceptual 'safe space' through its unsettling displays of ultraviolence—juxtaposed with my interconnectedness to Alex. Rather than allowing me the space to keep my fantasy active, Kubrick makes visible the reversal of the gaze—rendering me the vulnerable object of Alex's eye. From this opening shot, I am forced to realize Alex's words are meant for me. His insidious gaze pathologically draws me into his dystopian world, then, as the camera slowly withdraws, he raises his glass to the toast the camera, "letting [me] know we are in for one for one hell of a ride [together]." <sup>79</sup>

Copjec's analysis similarly pushes psychoanalytic film theory toward a multifaceted and malleable conceptualization of the function of the gaze. In Lacan's discussion of the mirror phase, he describes a moment where we experience the *a priori* lack that defines our subjectivity, this is the point at which the child realizes "I am not in the picture."<sup>80</sup> Lacan called this addendum, the theory of separation in which the child realizes in their own reflection there is something in the picture that is not really me because it is "in no way mastered by me."<sup>81</sup> Instead

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<sup>79</sup> Taken from Malcolm McDowell's commentary on the director's cut of the film.

<sup>80</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1964, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977) 96.

<sup>81</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1964, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977) 96.

of terrifying me, this object—or piece of my/the self—“grasps me, solicits me at every moment.”<sup>82</sup> This moment marks our compulsion toward finding some missing object (the *objet petit a*) and the simultaneous beginning of our psychological anxiety caused by the belief that we are never quite complete—i.e. there is always a gap between how we see ourselves and our understanding of the roles defined for us by the Symbolic.

Copjec opens up this space further in her explanation of how Lacan saw a potential screen in every mirror. If the mirror is a screen, then every screen also has the potential to disrupt the subject’s sense of mastery over the visual field and/or belief in a potential toward wholeness.<sup>83</sup> The possibilities of this space highlight another moment the paratactic method presents itself to us. How you and I experience this disruption will, of course, not present itself in the same way. But regardless of our subjective interpretation, this moment marks a shift in our perception where we will both begin to lose mastery over the visual field by encountering ourselves as the *stain in the picture* looking back at us. How we interpret ourselves as this stain cannot follow the same pathway, but we remain a stain nonetheless. We are not the image in the mirror looking back, but the object of the image in the spectral gaze. Because we cannot step outside of ourselves, we can never truly grasp how we exist beyond spectral images (mirrors, pictures, videos, etc.). Copjec goes on to highlight how, as the subject experiences this sense of loss within the spectre of the screen, s/he will increasingly encounter the gaze: “at the moment the gaze is discerned, the image, the entire visual field, takes on a terrifying alterity. It loses its ‘belong-to-me aspect’ and suddenly assumes the function of a screen.”<sup>84</sup> As we are confronted with the loss of self in the screen (qua the ‘belong-to-me aspect’) we are simultaneously

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<sup>82</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1964. trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977) 100.

<sup>83</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>84</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) 35.



confronted with the idea that the film's objects regard us as the spectator. It is here, in the screen, that we encounter the true nature of the Lacanian gaze.

When we meet the gaze in this way, it has the effect of triggering us visually forcing us to consider how we are always exposed to some unknown object. Fantasy is our response to this over proximity. It answers the question of who and what we are to the Other by providing a veil to cover our lack of consistency. Here we can see more explicitly how fantasy, for example, functions as a frame to identify with the irrational injunction of the Symbolic as the gaze before which we imagine ourselves acting. In this context, fantasy tells me how to desire by providing me a framework to imagine (a) the existence of a knowing, big Other which confirms my existence and (b) posits an excess object as somehow eluding my gaze which, if located, holds the key to my existence beyond the big Other. Our (un)conscious desire thus depends on this missing piece of our-self and fantasy is the framework through which I believe some object (person, experience, or practice) will finally function as "it," as what we desire.

From this position Alex's role begins to take on a shifting complexity. While Alex's gaze does not become any less unsettling, when we shift the focus of subjective desire toward disrupting fantasy—rather than searching for wholeness—the interconnectedness we experience with Alex opens the space to remove the fantasmatic veil. At a basic temporal level, Kubrick's presentation of Alex forces me to acknowledge that Alex is always-already regarding me as the spectator. What is so unnerving about this position is how seemingly impossible it is to reflexively find myself out of the thicket. The problem we experience can be articulated in the follow terms, if I remain trapped in the illusion of mastery, I will continue to reflexively search for a missing piece of my-self but feel as if I am always being forced to respond to the demands of an-other (e.g. the Symbolic, Alex, etc.). In this scenario, can we ever truly define a space

beyond the Other to focus our reflection on ourselves? In a simplified way, this is an expression of a common anxiety we experience when trying to reflect as teachers. During every moment of quiet contemplation are minds are responding to the demands of some other thing which requires our attention? Beyond the pragmatics of time, would we not find that fears about our self-identity are at the root of our anxiety as teachers? What is this anxiety other than the feeling that we have no control, no control to define our identity within the gaze of the Other?

In a like manner, I feel a similar anxiety within Alex's gaze. Each frame forces me to emerge from the relative anonymity of a darkened theatre and become present for all to see. In Lacanian terms, to imagine the self as the constant object of the gaze is to occupy the position of the hysteric and (un)consciously experience a sense of constant questioning of the big Other: *what do you want from me?* The movement toward hysterically questioning actually starts the moment we begin to formulate a sense of self-identity in the mirror phase. Following Lacan's schema, our *a priori* alienation can be exemplified through the following scenario: my mother (caregiver) holding me in front of a mirror and pointing to my reflection, exclaiming something to the effect of, "Look, it's you..." Whatever thing (name, gender, etc.) follows this exclamation represents the most basic form of the signifier. Because this (and all other) conferrals of language are arbitrary, meaning we do not know why we have been defined as any-thing within the Symbolic, we are forced to constantly address the (big) Other with the question, '*Che vuoi?*'<sup>85</sup>—meaning, what do you want from me? Or, in slightly different terms, why am I what you said that I am?

Plagued by self-doubt, we begin to internalize the demands of the Other. But because we do not fully understand our own identity in comparison to the Other, we will ultimately begin to

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<sup>85</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989).

desire what we perceive as the desires of the Other.<sup>86</sup> This is why Žižek describes desire as an imaginative projection constituted by fantasies about the Other's desires and the vain hope that an impossible oneness is waiting for us just around the corner.<sup>87</sup> While this appears to be a complex philosophical movement, it is easily imagined my returning again to the mirror phase. My m(o)ther's gaze in the mirror signifies this function; it is the gaze through which I first encounter the desire of the Other. Our *a priori* fantasy is that of our mother's (caregivers) desire; if we were able to understand what our mother desired in us, it would be possible to overcome the deadlock of our identity. In this way, we can observe how the other's desire is transformed into the object of my desire.<sup>88</sup> This corresponds to the hysterical desire to know: what do others want from me? What do others see in me? What am I to others?

But If we accept that there is no big Other, where do we find our sense of self-worth? This mirrors the psychoanalytic question Žižek asks of the hysteric—from where does s/he desire? Because, as Žižek maintains, “the problem for the hysterical subject is that he always needs to have recourse to another subject to organize his desire,”<sup>89</sup> We remain trapped in the dilemma in which we, as subjects, never know what we are or really want, since the Other's desire forever remains an enigma to us. Do we really want to believe that there is no big Other? Even as we seemingly let go of the Symbolic, we find ourselves trapped within its discourse because we cannot navigate our ontological inconsistency. As we accept the meaningless nature of the Symbolic, we find new layers of our self-identity that we are unable to navigate without refencing it. At this juncture, do we truly believe that is possible to let go of any notion of

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<sup>86</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1964. trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977) 312.

<sup>87</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*. (London: Verso, 1997).

<sup>88</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001) 191.

<sup>89</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 187.

subjective wholeness? Or, at this point in our analysis, do you continue to believe in the ultimate fantasy, that somehow—even if it is paradoxically by working through the Symbolic and the Imaginary—that you can find some semblance of mastery?

### **The Neighbor & Other Monsters**

Much like the function of our *a priori* fantasy of the m(o)ther's gaze, I encounter Alex as an Other who might be able to unlock the mystery of my own desire. But, as I will soon encounter, the basic paradox of desire is that its only function is desire for desire itself. Because of Alex's unrestrained expressions of ultraviolence, as spectators of *A Clockwork Orange*, we will (likely) know nothing of the graphic pleasures Kubrick documents in the first Act of the film. In this sense, it is extraordinarily difficult to see ourselves, or any approximation of ourselves, in a narrative analogous to Kubrick's presentation. But when I continually isolated my reflections on Alex's most egregious act of sexual and physical violence, it became possible to construct a view of Alex within Lacan's formulaic logic of *enjoyment*: since it cannot possibly be "I" who enjoys these acts, then it must be "You" because clearly "someone" is out there enjoying. Whether this "You" is represented by the real acts of subject violence that we bear witness to on the evening new or the countless individuals who post pictures of themselves dressed as Alex on the internet, the people that 'enjoy' *A Clockwork Orange* always seem to be one's neighbor, never oneself. In much more practical terms, because my use of the film has been received with skepticism or disgust by many educators, I often found myself playing out this logic by offering elaborate justifications for why I used the film as the medium for my analysis—always explaining, "yes, I appreciate the film but..." it is someone else who truly *enjoys* it.

This importance of uncovering the logic of enjoyment is providing a shifted perspective on the subject's relationship to the *objet petit a*. What emerges is a conflicted orientation that is externalized in the form of fantasy about the Other. At the surface, what is experienced is an outward frustration toward the Other whereby I encounter the enjoyment of the Other's desire, but my own secrets still have not been revealed. Why are others allowed to freely enjoy *A Clockwork Orange*, but I encounter negative judgement from my peers? How does Alex enjoy so freely, but I remained trapped in a constant search for an unknown piece of my identity? In more basic terms, this logic manifests itself in the belief that my next-door neighbor (an 'other') is likely harboring a dirty little secret—i.e. a perverse fetish, an obscene form of enjoyment—that behind the closed doors and drawn curtains of her/his normal looking house—allows her/him to access an enjoyment that is inaccessible to me. As a teacher I often imagine scenarios following a very similar formulation, behind closed classroom doors my colleagues (i.e. neighbors/Others) have access to an enjoyment that is inaccessible to me. Fantasies of my colleagues obscene enjoyment functions as a basic instance of *disavowal*—"I myself know nothing of this obscene enjoyment because I work hard, follow the prescribed curriculum, and so on—and *displacement*—"It is not I who enjoys, it is You!"

This formulation uncovers how fantasy prevents us from moving beyond our subjective deadlock. At the level of our surface temporality, we might imagine this scenario as playing out in displaced forms of anger. Because other teachers violate the rules and cause distrust between the faculty and administration, I am forced to endure increased scrutiny, greater bureaucratic regulation, and so on. While these feelings might be real, at the basic level of our understanding, we simultaneously experience an (un)conscious enjoyment through their transgressions because they hold open the possibility of our own satisfaction. Even if I am not enjoying, I know

enjoyment is possible because I am witnessing an Other who enjoys. Thus, despite our deadlock, we experience enjoyment in the form of a fantasy ideal. If this Other is enjoying so can I. On the condition that we unconsciously cling to this fantasy ideal, we can reflexively observe our continued path toward repression and our ultimate alienation.

Žižek argues that the fantasy ideal, places us in a position of understanding toward the Other, rather than resentment—because the Other is enjoying at my expense. While on the surface I may reflexively experience frustration—because the teacher across the hall has found a way out of my own hellish existence—allows me to maintain the hope (an-other form of temporal fantasy) that I might experience one day thereby maintain my own fragile existence. My fantasy, given these points, is maintained by my unconscious ability to misattribute my own impossibility to an-Other that seems to enjoy in a way I cannot experience but am only able to imagine. In spite of this, this distinction between our own lack of impossible enjoyment and the non-lacking status of the Other concurrently opens the possibility for imagining ourselves in positions that would otherwise be unimaginable. Rather than viewing this interconnectedness as another position of deadlock, how can we imagine this as opening a reflexive space that would otherwise be foreclosed to our line of reasoning? How can we view this position as the externalization of our fantasy and as exposing our fetishization of the enjoyment of the Other? If we were to invert this perspective, would I not be the one who enjoys, the other who is harboring a dirty secret that prevents my colleagues from fully enjoying? If there is no big Other, then the Other who in enjoys must be you or me.

In *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex is not just the neighbor, but through Kubrick's use of Alex's gaze, he represents the point at which the entire visual field organizes itself. While the unknowableness of my own lack and the coordinates of the Other's desire always seem just out

of my reach, what is most alluring about Alex is that he appears to have found enjoyment despite his own impossibility. While at this point we have identified a pathway for understanding the Symbolic register from multiple trajectories and uncovered the complex role that fantasy plays in structuring our (mis)recognition of reality, we still seem to remain somewhat trapped on the edge of our ontological horizon. We are unable to break, if only for a moment, from our misrecognitions, a fall headlong into the abyss of the Real. Žižek would caution us that this is because an encounter with the Real is still a difficult and perilous task. In Lacanian parlance, to grasp at the Real is to confront the idea that we “never had a real existence.”<sup>90</sup> This is not a denial of our material existence (although it is not a conferral of it either), but the acknowledgement that everything we have understood about our self-identity and the nature of reality is potentially false. If everything we know and believe is false, then so too is what we believed about our existence.

But this position, however paradoxical in nature, should be viewed as anything but anguishing or hopeless. Rather it announces the moment we first encounter a piece of the Real, it is a reflexive encounter that announces a kind of “‘Thou art that’ which articulates the very kernel of the subject’s being”<sup>91</sup> and indicates the presence of the Real itself. As a way forward, we can only encounter our fundamental fantasies insofar as we are willing to undergo what Lacan call *subjective destitution*—the position through which the subject discovers nothing other than a spiral of continuous alienation.<sup>92</sup> Methodologically, we might imagine subjective destitution as a continuous process of reflection aimed at repeatedly articulating ‘Thou art that,’ a process where we seek to understanding that we nothing other than that.

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<sup>90</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997) 36.

<sup>91</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997) 36.

<sup>92</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006).

## Spiraling Toward the Real

Returning again to Andersen's analysis of the film, he notes that films are able to portray the unimaginable because the viewer ultimately knows the images on the screen are not real.<sup>93</sup> As an example, he highlights a moment early in the film when a young woman—an unnamed operatic singer at the Korova Milk Bar—is confronted with Alex's gaze (see Figure 4.6).



Figure 4.6: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

The woman, sitting at the bar with friends, sings a few bars from an opera familiar to Alex. Hearing this, Dim makes an obscene gesture toward the woman. Alex becomes enraged at the gesture and quickly strikes Dim with a cane. When the woman looks in the group's direction, Alex again raises his glass, this time acknowledging his appreciation for the woman (See Figure 4.7).

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<sup>93</sup> Nathan Andersen, *Shadow Philosophy: Plato's Cave and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).





Figure 4.7: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

While the scene's explicit function is to establish Alex's alpha position among the Droogs and his deep reverence for "Ludwig van," it simultaneously creates a moment where I encounter Alex's gaze from a slightly shifted perspective. As a spectator, I am (un)consciously aware of Alex's danger, but, according to Andersen, because we are not a part of the situation being depicted, "we don't have to react. We can't. We can close our eyes, walk away, but we are otherwise unable to affect what we see. We don't face that face, only its moving image, framed."<sup>94</sup> Of course, on this literal point Andersen is right, I am not physically present in the Korova Milk Bar.

But instead of offering this space, how does our understanding of scene transform when we view Alex as the Other who enjoys? Alex confronts us with the image of someone who enjoys without regard for his own impossibility—an other who locates a target to act out the aggression that arises as a response to the impossibility of his own wholeness. Alex's enjoys without consideration for the Other's desires. In short, Alex represents the possibility of having one's cake and eating it too. Perhaps this is why, as noted previously, in Kubrick's estimation, "there is a basic psychopathological, unconscious identification with Alex." In such term, in the

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<sup>94</sup> Nathan Andersen, *Shadow Philosophy: Plato's Cave and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015) 15.

opening scene when Alex states, “There was me,” it is as if this “me,” this “I,” in some way contains a disturbing potentiality, a disturbing superposition of a me that enjoys itself (Lacan’s *jouit de lui-même*).<sup>95</sup> That is to say, Alex represents a certain production of himself that punctuates the true sadistic pleasure of being, a subject unbound from the compulsion to locate her/his desires in that of the Other. This is the subject that finds a perverse mastery (or perhaps dominance) over their own lack. My (un)conscious identification with Alex, as such, represents the possibility of what could be if I were not restrained—by the Symbolic, Imaginary (fantasy), and so on.

I increasingly came to view Alex as confronting me with my own fantasmatic belief that if I were only able to uncover the secrets of the Other’s desires, my own secrets might be revealed. This path is the basic formulation for the psychoanalytic concept of drive, the process through which the subject encircles the *objet petit a* as a privileged object. The gaze becomes interlaced in this function by compelling me to look again and again for what appears to offer access to the unseen. When Alex raises his glass, for example, it appears to mark the point at which the visual field takes my desire into account. But does the gaze provide us with this direct of a path? If the screen functions as a mirror, we are forced to consider how Alex’s gaze is constituted of an unrepresentable alterity, forcing us to dwell in the once concealed spaces of unknowing? Through the process of repetitious reflection, I begin to derive satisfaction from repeatedly following this same path, propelled by the belief that an unknown piece of my self-identity would become visible to me. Of course, this position reiterates how we become trapped within the realm of fantasies, transfixed by the fantasmatic belief that if we only search deep enough within ourselves we will find an illusory piece of wholeness.

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<sup>95</sup> Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan (New York: Norton, 1998).

The last few months of this analysis were spent obsessively pouring over every detail of Kubrick's presentation of Alex. While the reflexive cycle remained largely the same, I began to lose sight of precisely what I was searching for. According to Žižek, when we deprive desire of the privileged object—through which we might attain wholeness—it becomes an endless, repetitive circle, which is to say, desire ceases to be desire and drive becomes *death drive*. It is through the notion of death drive that we encounter the full weight of Žižek's self-reflexive negativity and the possibility of traversing the fantasies that prevent our encounter with the Real. Death drive is not biological—as in common references to sex drive, for example, but a drive that is opposed to instinct. Death drive, according to Žižek, functions as a brake on biological instincts: “We become ‘humans’ when we get caught in a closed, self-propelling loop of repeating the same gesture and finding satisfaction in it.”<sup>96</sup> Death drive, as such, represents the reflexive possibility of breaking free from our fantasies. It is the moment of negativity implicit to the dialectical development of subjectivity, the moment we spiral into the abyss of the Real and encounter the nothingness that is our self-identity.

Žižek argues, “the Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of life-tension.”<sup>97</sup> Instead, the repetitious movement of death drive is a process of marking the enchainning events of our primordial subjectivity, and through this process, death drive opens up a reflexive space deep within our subjective self—beyond notions of truth and pleasure (the Imaginary) or economics and politics (the Symbolic). This being we encounter in death drive is a self-annihilating, self-sabotaging subject created from the potentiality of the autonomous subject itself. By repeatedly grasping at an object which eludes me, the reflexive shift to death drive is a pivotal concept in

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<sup>96</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012) 499.

<sup>97</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 62.

psychoanalytic theory for encountering the Real and understanding our own self-relating negativity.

In various iterations, Žižek often notes, it is not until we realize our precious fantasy is shit that we are able to think beyond the coordinates of our current subjective frame. The point to be gleaned here returns us to the necessity of our own subjective destitution. In Žižek's description of Althusser's autobiography *L'avenir Dure Longtemps*, he notes that Althusser's greatest fear was that others would become aware of his own non-existence. This fear, rather than being a point of avoidance for Žižek, is the critical movement of psychoanalysis demarcating the subject's loss of anxiety about her/his own non-existence. That is to say, material reality outside myself definitely exists; the problem has always been that I myself do not exist. By accepting our own non-existence and embracing the destitution of the death drive, we are able to relinquish the fetish of the hidden treasure responsible for our unique worth. Žižek calls this moment "the unbearable lightness of being nothing." In terms of our own reflection, this is the intimate moment that conjoins madness and freedom when it becomes possible for us to become un-glued from direct referential relationships. "The moment of decision is the moment of madness"<sup>98</sup> precisely in so far as that there is no big Other to provide the ultimate guarantee, there is no fantasy to veil our discomfort, and all notions of stability that guarantee an ontological cover for our subjective decisions are lost.

### **Gaze as the Real**

As a final movement toward the trauma of the Real, I attempt to encounter this moment of madness through *A Clockwork Orange's* HOME-sequence. As I will demonstrate, Kubrick's

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<sup>98</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000) 258.

presentation of events in this sequence provided me the context to uncover several shifting pieces of my own understanding through the reflexive shift to death drive. At its core, this final movement remained rooted in axiom, the way we perceive a problem is the problem itself. However, as I encountered the reflexive trauma of the Real, it became necessary to confront understandings about my-self that were previously unimaginable. For many (or most) spectators, the HOME-sequence is the most disturbing and controversial segment of the film. The sequence (analyzed in detail below) depicts Alex's and his Droogs brutally beating an aging writer (F. Alexander) and raping his wife while he looks on helplessly. Critics of the film, often highlight the HOME-sequence as an illustration of Kubrick's detached glorification of a certain kind of amoral behavior, presenting spectators with a colorful, operatic, vision of violence and sexual deviance. Kubrick's response to this claim is that what is presented is a deadly serious satire about the violent tendencies of contemporary society. Regardless of our larger interpretation of meaning versus intent, in its visual presentation, there is no segment of the film that more readily exemplifies what Alex term's *ultraviolence*—an exaggerated and unprovoked form of violence highlighted by the rape, murder, and senseless brutality inflicted on helpless victims for the pleasure of violence itself.

Given the very real violence of contemporary society that we have watched unfold live on television and the internet and the unprecedented displays of violence portrayed in films in the years since the release of *A Clockwork Orange*, I have always been fascinated by the film's hold on society's collective psyche. Perhaps it is, as Andersen notes, that while "many films since have portrayed violence more realistically and explicitly, *A Clockwork Orange* captures powerfully the tension between the horror of the experience and the casual ease with which it can

be inflicted.”<sup>99</sup> In using this sequence as the final (dis)orientating scene in the film, I attempt to make explicit the full disruptive possibilities of the Žižekian lens whereby the Real of the gaze violently confronts me with the contradictions that hold my conceptual understandings of self (and other) together.

As has become the *modus operandi* at this juncture, Kubrick introduces and frames the scene through Alex, confronting the spectator with both his gaze and voice as our humble narrator (see Figure 4.8 and 4.9).



Figure 4.8: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.



Figure 4.9: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

In his narration, Alex interjects the threat of violence and trauma prior to the sequence itself:

The Durango-95 purred away real horrorshow (good, well) - a nice, warm, vibraty feeling all through your guttiwuts (guts). Soon, it was trees and dark, my brothers,

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<sup>99</sup> Nathan Andersen, *Shadow Philosophy: Plato's Cave and Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2015) 6.

with real country dark. We fillied (played) around for a while with other travelers of the night, playing hogs of the road. Then we headed West. What we were after now was the old surprise visit. That was a real kick, and good for laughs and lashings of the old ultra-violence.

Although I am intensely aware of the sequence of events that are about to unfold, I return briefly to my first reflection on the film to uncover the full complexity of how Kubrick portrays Alex in the film leading up to the HOME-sequence.

Prior to the HOME-sequence, we are shown a scene in a derelict casino where a rival gang is tearing the clothes off a woman (see Figure 4.10).



Figure 4.10: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

As the gang is about to rape the woman, Alex and his Droogs crash the gangs party like a marauding band of vigilantes, preventing the sexual assault by violently subduing the members of the rival gang. Earlier in the evening, after the Droogs leave the Korova Milk Bar, they attack a homeless man who was drunk on the street (see Figure 4.11).



Figure 4.11: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

While the violence is unprovoked, their attack is spurred by the groups disgust with his lack of motivation and how both his drunkenness and indolence harms society. Despite the discomfort we experience in his (and the Droogs) actions, we are left to question whether it is possible that Alex represents some form of perverse hero in this nightmarish dystopian landscape? Throughout the duration of this analysis, this is a question I returned to again and again never fully grasping how this frame fully impacted me.

This early framing of Alex follows the general trope of the anti-hero or the hero that lacks traditional 'heroic' characteristics like idealism, courage, and morality. But even following this frame, I often wondered if Alex lacks these characteristics or does he represent such an extreme manifestation of them that it is difficult for us to locate our own understandings within their narrative? Returning again to our previous reading of the law, we uncovered how the ultimate authority of the law and morality was grounded only in itself—we can only define the authority of morality because it is moral. But perhaps Alex's frame extends beyond the bounds of this understanding? I viewed this question as not unlike the recent shift in many super hero films—see, for example, Christopher Nolan's *Batman Trilogy: The Dark Knight* and James Mangold's *Logan*—where we encounter a hero that exhibits many undesirable traits, plagued by internal strife, and intense psychological issues. But ultimately do we not find that society is willing to



look past the hero's violent transgressions if the hero is able to stop a more violent threat (or transgression) from occurring? In the Dark Knight, for example, we see Batman 'save' society from various external terrorist threats—although Žižek makes a compelling argument that Bane represents the true revolutionary hero in the final film. Despite the unimaginable violence portrayed in Logan, in the end, he saves a group of kids from their imprisonment and exploitation. Thus, is the fatal flaw of *A Clockwork Orange* the lack of a clearly identifiable positive outcome as a result of Alex's actions?

When we pick back up with Alex and his Droogs, their joy ride comes to an end when the Droogs come upon a house literally identified by a glowing sign reading "HOME" (see Figure 4.12)



Figure 4.12: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

The ultra-modernist design and clean, white ex/interior functions as an immediate counterpoint to brutalist architecture and dystopian graininess of the rest of Alex's world (see Figure 4.13).



Figure 4.13: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

Kubrick gives us a glimpse inside the HOME where a man—F. Alexander—quietly sits at a typewriter (we later find out the man is authoring the novel, *A Clockwork Orange*) and his wife, in a nearby room, is shown reading a book. The solitude of the couple’s evening is broken when Alex rings the home’s doorbell asking to use the phone because his friend has been in a terrible accident. After pausing for a moment, the couple coincides to their own empathy and hesitantly agrees to let Alex use the telephone. Upon entering the home, Alex and his Droogs raucously weave their way inward taking both the wife and husband captive. As both are held prisoner, Alex begins singing an acapella rendition of Gene Kelly’s *Singin’ in the Rain* while violently assaulting the husband and methodically prepping the wife for her rape.

On one level, this moment is the most disorientating scene of the HOME-sequence as it enunciates the full sadistic horror of Alex’s act—the obscene pleasure and ease with which he engages in ultraviolence. But as I continually viewed and reflected on the scene, it simultaneously marked a turning point—or more precisely, a total disruption in my (un)conscious understanding of self in relation to Alex. After his rendition of *Singin’ in the Rain*, the HOME-sequence crescendos with a three-shot progression depicting Alex looking directly looking into

the camera (see Figure 4.14) stating, “Viddy well little brother, Viddy well! (see well little brother, see well);” immediately followed by a point-of-view (POV) shot of the husband lying gaged on the floor (see Figure 4.14) and the wife standing naked and gagged opposite him.



Figure 4.14: Scene from A Clockwork Orange, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.



Figure 4.15: Scene from A Clockwork Orange, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

In this movement, the relationship between the spectator and Alex can be seen as permanently altered/ruptured.

Even though we have encountered Alex’s gaze on a number of occasions, this encounter proves to be more disorientating than previous moments. On the surface level, it is this first instance where the gaze is immediately transformed into Alex’s direct point-of-view forcing the spectator to witness and experience the crime on a deeper temporal level. Further, while Alex has engaged us through his narration previously, in this moment, he is explicitly compelling us to see well or not avert our attention. In view of this orientation, we are confronted directly with the

gaze, forced to consider how the film's object's regard us as a spectator. For the duration of the sequence, we cannot look away because we are temporally intertwined with Alex. When we consider how the Other's desire might unlock our own unknown desires, this repeated calling on the audience appears as a response to our own alienation through the demand to enjoy and a conformity to its operation.

Because of the spectator's position vis-à-vis Alex, Kubrick is able to simultaneously exploit (through appeals to sex) and repel (through his depiction of violence), making the film uncomfortable to watch because the spectator is both aroused and sickened. This impossible position forced to me to begin asking myself how do I understand myself in relation to what we see, hear, and experience in the film? Given what is depicted in the HOME-sequence, my initial analysis on the Real did not focus on violence as such but my temporal responses to Kubrick's anesthetization of sadistic violence. At the purest level of human emotion, it is, of course, difficult to continually reflect on a scene depicting the rape of woman while her husband is forced to watch. Kubrick furthers this untenable position by presenting the film through the vantage point of Alex's point-of-view (the POV technique). In sharing Alex's perspective, each time I have watched the film I have experienced a complex array of (un)conscious feelings and responses ranging from fascination, to empathy, and abject disgust. What Kubrick is able to accomplish in this framing should not be diminished. The spectator is both allowed and forced to experience Alex's acts not only as they occur, but through the lens of Alex's fantasies. As a consequence, Kubrick is able to represent fantasy, as external to our reality thereby forcing the viewer to confront the role that fantasy plays in our subjective experience. By viewing fantasy from the outside, this position makes it possible to begin thinking through and potentially overcome the illusions on which our desires are based thereby confronting the void beneath our

subjective understanding of reality. When we traverse the fantasy in an attempt to encounter the Real, we must begin by acknowledging (and accepting) that there is nothing behind reality itself and experience the subjective loss of social identity.

### **Sign' in the Rain**

In the two years that I have been researching Kubrick and writing this text, I have engaged in countless conversations with academics, cinephiles, and coffeehouse combatants trying to peel-back what it is about the film that seems to gnaw away at my interlocutor. What has been most interesting—and illuminating—throughout the course of these conversations is the detail with which my interlocutors can describe Alex's crimes. On the surface, this is, of course, not surprising given that Alex's crimes create the primary thread that binds the film's narrative structure. What is missed, however, is that Kubrick does not actually display the imagery of forced intercourse or the bloody moment of death during any of Alex's acts. In fact, the only point in the film when violence is actually depicted is when Alex himself is forced to bear witness to it during his re-education as a part of his aversion therapy. Yet, (many) detractors continue to cite the obscene depiction of violence, rape, and murder as *the* reason why the film is so morally reprehensible. Admittedly, even after watching the film countless times, I often believe I am able to envision details in the film that are not actually present. Further, in my writing of this analysis, I have had to repeatedly return to scenes to spot check where the film ends and where my imagination begins. But what allows for such psychological function?

Returning again to the HOME-sequence, in the moments prior to Mrs. Alexander's rape, Alex exults the song '*Singin' in the Rain*' (see Figure 4.16).



Figure 4.16: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

In many of my conversations noted above, this is the moment where my interlocutor's analysis of Alex would often begin. According to Anderson, we understand—for the most part—what we see in films; they make sense to us. The sounds we hear cue a certain psychological or psychological response thereby permeating a particular mood to a scene.<sup>100</sup> Stitched together, the repeating aesthetic and euphonic forms of a scene are significant to us because they formulate connections to the world around us, allowing us to become familiar with alien terrains, and the many versions of reality that we struggle to understand each day. With its allusion to Gene Kelly performing “*Singin’ in the Rain*” Kubrick places Alex within the cinematic context of Kelly who was ready for love. Despite my own general aversion to ‘classic’ cinema, it is difficult to hear the song without immediately imagining Kelly strolling down the street in the pouring rain (see Figure 4.17).

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<sup>100</sup> Nathan Andersen, *Shadow Philosophy: Plato's Cave and Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2015).



Figure 4.17: Scene from *Signin' in the Rain*, Directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen. Hollywood, Metro-Goldwin Mayer, 1952.

In fact, I am no longer sure if I have seen the Kelly film or if the image of Kelly hanging off a lamp post while singing the song has simply become part of our cultural lexicon. Notwithstanding my own reminiscing, there are few songs that seem to better personify the convergence of love and happiness than '*Singin in the Rain.*'

The original song is dripping saccharine sentiment, a singer so deeply in love that not even the rain can ruin their day. But Alex's vocalizations contain a jarring irony. His actions are both the antithesis of the original song and depict someone enthralled by the pleasure of their violent acts. What is love for Alex? Throughout the film, Alex is depicted as repeatedly destroying objects that other people love. Perhaps this scene functions as one of the best examples of Alex's force because of the dual nature of his destruction: as he attempts to destroy the object of F. Alexander's love he concurrently destroys the song itself which symbolizes love for the spectator. Within this context, we encounter a moment when our connection to Alex reaches beyond the film, beyond our normal understanding of how we interact with films. During the later stages of this analysis, I repeatedly watched (and re-watched) Gene Kelly's performance and found it impossible to not think about rape and violence. The song as Symbolic representation of love had been destroyed. It was no longer possible for me to contextualize the

film through Gene Kelly, as someone ready for love. Instead, we encounter Alex, where love is the barren and anonymized destitution of the “old ultraviolence” and flesh is reduced to the “old in-out, in-out.” He is “Singin’ in the rain” (bash), “just singin’ in the rain” (kick). Alex’s performance, as such, disrupts our standard notions of the cinematic agreement—and it is through this inversion that it becomes possible to identify a horror *and* disruptive beauty within his performance.

Viewing this notion from a parallax perspective, in Žižek’s analysis of Caravaggio’s opera *Testa di Medusa* he describes how the imagery of unseen horror functions as placeholders for “a sound that doesn’t yet resonate but remains stuck in the throat... the obverse of the voice that gives body to what we can never see, to what eludes our gaze.”<sup>101</sup> Is Alex’s performance not a disjunctive and horrific sound that serves as a placeholder for the imagery that eludes our gaze? Or, in other terms, Alex’s song allows the spectator to see the unseen horror of the act—the act of Mrs. Alexander’s rape—with her/his ears. From here we must ask ourselves, what role does Alex’s use of the song play in the spectator’s unconscious memories of scenes that are not in the film? Through Alex’s performance, we are forced to encounter how the voice functions as an “organ without a body,” Žižek’s reversal of the Deleuzian concept, meaning the voice is an undead vocal drive—or a piece of the Lacanian Real—that insists in the absence of a physical presence. From this perspective, the listener gives shape to a spectral body based on our perception of the sounds. Existing as a phantomlike protuberance lurking behind a mirror, when there is no positive knowledge of the Thing-in-itself; one designates a place for the images

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<sup>101</sup> Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera’s Second Death* (New York: Routledge, 2002).



unseen in the HOME-sequence by making a temporal space for them. In Lacanian terms, “If beyond appearance, there is no thing itself, there is the gaze.”<sup>102</sup>

Here again we encounter ourselves as an object of the gaze but from a shifted from perspective. We begin to see how even at our most basic understandings of self-in-reality, as derived in the senses, things are not what we perceive them to be. As teachers, we are, of course, aware of the importance of knowledge that is not immediately observable by our senses, but how much of our daily reality is comprised of the spatial bearings that come from coordinates that are outside the body? As we walk through our classrooms are eyes are always directed against this outside, but I can only see from one point. Of course, in our existence, we are looked at from all sides—just as we encounter the gaze in the abyss of the Real. In his article “I Hear You with My Eyes,” Žižek explains how the gaze and the voice are both objects that give the subject an uncanny impression of the Real. He warns, however, “hearing with one’s eyes’ is not the same as “seeing with one’s ears.” According to Žižek, the gaze is far more mortifying than the voice; while voice and gaze relate to each other as life and death: voice vivifies, whereas gaze mortifies. As an illustration of this function, Žižek references the “silent scream” of Edvard Munch’s painting “The Scream” to exemplify how, even when the voice fails, we remain aware that the violence of death is always nearby. As Žižek puts it:

Far more horrifying than to see with our ears—to hear vibrating life substance beyond visual representations, this blind spot in the field of the visible—is to hear with our eyes, that is, to see the absolute silence that marks the suspension of life,

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<sup>102</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) 107.

as in Caravaggio's *Testa di Medusa*. Is not the scream of Medusa by definition 'stuck in the throat'?<sup>103</sup>

Within this context, we see can see the full disruptive function of the HOME-sequence. In Alex's rendition of *Singin' in the Rain* we see with our ears and encounter the spectacle of Alex's assault—even though the details we see are not actually depicted by Kubrick in the film. And in viewing the spectacle from behind Alex's mask—i.e. Kubrick POV technique—I encounter my own silent scream, like the silenced voice of F. Alexander lying gagged on the floor. In my own silent mortification—or as Kubrick might identify it later, the experience of being eyes wide shut—I encounter the trauma of the Real.

In Lacanian terms, this connection between the trauma of my self-awareness and Alex can be seen as a kind of '*surplus-enjoyment*' in the sense that it exceeds the contours of our standard understandings of filmic characters and narrative fictions, forcing me to encounter problematic, repressed, and even traumatic dimensions of my subjectivity.<sup>104</sup> In this way, it is possible to unveil the basic interconnectedness between myself and Žižek's reading of the Other as a source of fascination and intense attraction. As noted previously, Žižek frequently employs the term 'subject supposed to enjoy' to describe how the subject's enjoying of the Other can function as a fetish-object—allowing me to gaze upon the Other as a fantasy ideal or screen while preserving my own (mis)recognition of an unproblematic identity. While the final act of the HOME-sequence leads to an unequivocal feeling of horror, the introduction of a 'joyous song' covers the precarious structure of the self in relation to the Other.

The voice, in this way, provides a fetish-object around which I can organize my own enjoyment through Alex. Or, to put this in other terms, the performance allows us to see the

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<sup>103</sup> Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>104</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012).

enjoyment of the sexual act with our ears. Unconsciously, our desire manifests itself by using Alex as an open portal to understanding the enjoyment of the neighbor thereby allowing me access to an enjoyment that has always been forbidden to me. The relationship between the spectator and Alex, as such, functions as a site to locate fantasies and profound libidinal investment—i.e. we ‘get off’ on fantasizing about Others who enjoy in ways we are afraid to enjoy. What we see here is two sides of the same traumatic encounter with the Real. This encounter creates a disjunctive space that opens the possibility for a reflexive encounter with self against the grain of our standard coordinates of understanding, a space that is always-already present but is radically otherwise.

### **Viddy Well... Again**

Just after Alex finishes singing, Kubrick confronts us with Alex’s most chilling gaze because of its connection to the statement, “Viddy well little brother, Viddy well!” One way of unpacking its function as a basic enunciation of the gaze is by connecting it back to Althusser’s *theory of interpellation*. From this perspective, Alex can be frames as ‘hailing’ the spectator and the spectator—as the one who responds to the policeman’s call “*Hey, you there*”—immediately identifies her/himself as a subject of ideological (Symbolic) power.<sup>105</sup> Žižek, however, pushes Althusser’s theory noting that the subject is not produced at the moment of being hailed; rather, there is already an uncanny subject that proceeds the gesture of subjectivization.<sup>106</sup> While the policeman’s cry may provoke a direct response from one respondent, it also necessitates the (un)conscious formulation of a reaction by *all* who hear it. Even for those who protest their innocence, Žižek argues, they experience a feeling of “Kafkaesque” abstract guilt:

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<sup>105</sup> Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

<sup>106</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (London: Verso, 2006).

A feeling that, in the eyes of power, I am a priori terribly guilty of something, although it is not possible for me to know what precisely I am guilty of, and for that reason—since I don't know what I am guilty of—I am even more guilty; or more pointedly, it is in this very ignorance that my true guilt consists.<sup>107</sup>

As a spectator, Kubrick's use of relentless performative juxtapositions situates me such that Alex's acts of transgression highlight the frustrating inescapability of Symbolically determinate guilt.

In Alex's hail he is calling upon me to acknowledge the repressed unconscious that already exists on the underside of the Symbolic—the piece of me that is the traumatic Real. In the moment that Alex compels me to see well, a feeling of anxiety is aroused in me as the spectator, by forcing me to identify with the visceral spectacle of the scene. What we see unfold is that the seemingly neutral gaze of the film is instead subjectivized into the partial gaze of the spectator's own desire: “the viewer is compelled to assume that the scene he witnesses is staged for his eyes, that his gaze was included in it from the very beginning.”<sup>108</sup> To add to my dislocation, Alex's address the camera in Nadsat—the slang of the Droogs—implicating me in the violence by identifying me as one of them (i.e. speaking to as a member of his gang). Kubrick then traps me in this position by framing the remainder of scene from inside Alex's mask thereby separating me from the external Symbolic community and reinforcing my position as his accomplice.

At the most basic level of structural enunciation this position forces us back into a confrontation with paradoxical edifice of Symbolic law and the notion that law can only exist when it becomes possible to imagine something beyond that law. But instead, on an abstract signifier or articulation, Alex represents the space beyond the law created by individual beings

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<sup>107</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005) 60.

<sup>108</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)* (London: Verso, 1992) 223.

that elude the law. In other words, the image of the Other as beyond the law paradoxically sustains the law. In this way, we return to a similar tautological frame but observe how the transgression of the law is always-already included within the law itself.<sup>109</sup> We can easily imagine this function playing itself out within the disciplinary apparatus of our schools or the daily confines of our classrooms. But how might we imagine this as uncovering unannounced structural dimensions of the discourse of education? Or, how does our own classroom instruction always-already include an unannounced dimension of what we fail to perceive but undermines every notion we try to convey?

Philosophically, it can therefore be helpful to imagine the law, Symbolic structures, or discourses—for example—as having two sides: the Public, Symbolic surface consisting of written and unspoken prohibitions (norms, rules, social conventions, etc.) and the underside or the domain of transgression where the Symbolic communicates the imperative enjoy! As subjects we are compelled to obey our true master, the master that always presses upon our unconscious, yet we fail to perceive its presence. As a pedagogical point of emphasis, by holding the Symbolic (law, discipline, education, etc.) and transgression in opposition to one another it is revealed that there is no point of synthesis between the two, thus forcing us to return to the reflexive imperative of embracing our destitution and encountering the register of the Real. Just as a dialectic interpretation of law must account for crime as the necessary founding gesture of law, we cannot recognize that we exist in reality until we fully experience our own nothingness.

What is most significant to understand about enjoyment, transgression and any attempt to overcome the failure of our understanding is that far from releasing us from our Symbolic mandate—and opening the possibility of adopting a radical position outside of the Symbolic/law—

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<sup>109</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999).

our transgression embroils us further within the normalizing structure. According to Žižek, this is because enjoyment itself, which we experience as transgression: “is in its innermost status something imposed, ordered—when we enjoy, we never do it ‘spontaneously’, we always follow a certain injunction.”<sup>110</sup> The psychoanalytic name for this obscene injunction, for the obscene call to ‘Enjoy,’ is the superego. The Symbolic can be conceived here as being internally monitored by the superego and, as such, is underpinned by the obscene possibility of its own violation. Thus, even as we move toward a reflexive encounter with the Real, the Symbolic has already anticipated our movement. In the specific case of *A Clockwork Orange*, we can see how this call plays itself out through the construction of various fantasy scenarios. What this reflexive position highlights is that as we encounter the trauma of the Real, our psyche will unconsciously continue to create fantasy scenarios to prevent this encounter—thereby keeping us pinned beneath the Symbolic and Imaginary registers.

From one transgressive position, for example, we might attempt to neutralize the gaze. Instead of being held by Alex’s desire, desire is transferred to a passive Other—an Other who can rescue Mrs. Alexander from her torturer. In many films this is the role of the ‘hero,’ a police officer or some Other who would risk it all to stop Alex. The difficulty we experience with *A Clockwork Orange* is that this position is absent from the narrative and the Other can only be modeled as a fantasmatic presence—lacking the full gravity of Alex’s being in our ontological horizon. The role of such a hero or savior is, of course, a well-documented narrative within education. Whether developed within the overworked imagery of *Stand and Deliver* and *Dead Poet’s Society* or the much more complex idea(l) of educating other people’s children, how many teachers would identify with the pathology that education is a vehicle to save children, society,

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<sup>110</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991) 9.

and so on. But the absence of this heroic role in the film makes this point of identification convoluted and difficult to sustain.

When *A Clockwork Orange* premiered, it was met with public backlash and claims that its narrative promoted violence and sexual deviance. This was particularly true in the U.K. where several copycat crimes were committed by teenage boys dressed as Droogs singing *Singin' in the Rain*. In the wake of the crimes, Kubrick steadfastly refuted the idea that films alone can trigger violent behavior but withdrew the film from public release in the U.K., a ban that was not lifted until after his death in 1999. In response to the public backlash, several of the film's actors and actresses spoke out in support of Kubrick and the film, including Adrienne Corri (Mrs. Alexander) who noted the enjoyment she experienced during the filming of the HOME-sequence (see Figure 4.18).



Figure 4.18: Adrienne Corri, Photograph from the filming of *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972. Accessed August 01, 2018. <http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm-260/photos/detail/?cmediafile=18878883>.

While seemingly disconnected from how we might directly experience the narrative of the film, the interjection of this understanding directly impacts our subjective experience of the film—and our experience of self through the film. In a broader context, we can begin to fully see the complexity of Lacan's triadic structure and the difficulties we face when reflexively navigating each register.

In view of Corri's comment, our capacity to neutralize the gaze is diminished because our (subjective) ability to maintain the construction of a passive other is disrupted—even if this only occurs on an unconscious level. The enunciation of her experience in 'reality' has the effect of dividing the spectator's temporal experience of the film between an enjoyment (pull) created by a yearning to rescue the woman and a repulsion (push) of the victim enjoying her suffering.<sup>111</sup> This reflexive trauma is an inversion of what we experienced through Alex's performance of *Singin' in the Rain*.<sup>111</sup> Rather than experiencing trauma as emanating from the film and disrupting the way we understand fantasy in reality, we can see how our experiences in reality disrupts the fantasies we experience through the film. This traumatic element functions to dislocate the subject from the passive Other and announces the dimension of the Real through the position 'Thou art that.' In my own reflexive experience, I was forced to accept my fundamental impotence. By suspending my ability to act—to rescue the victim, whether it is Mrs. Alexander from Alex or from herself—my impotence bears witness to the fact that I again became the dupe of my own fantasy. The importance of this realization is not that I was duped, but in the failure of the fantasy itself. What we see, at this juncture of the reflexive process, is a total transformation of the reflexive space. We are forced to accept that it is only possible to encounter our fantasies insofar as we are willing to face our own impotence—the moment of subjective destitution. No matter how I construct and image of my-self in relation to Alex qua Mrs. Alexander, I am confronted by the traumatic Real of my self-identity. Every encounter, every formulation, results in nothing other than a downward spiral. This spiraling movement—the reflexive death drive—lays bare the full horror of the interconnectedness between the spectator and Alex on multiple temporal level.

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<sup>111</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005).



### **Accomplice or Witness: What's it going to be then, eh?**

Although we might imagine how Alex continues to arouse the possibility of a primordial subjectivity that exists beyond the law, the trauma of Real enfolds the spectator into the scene, presenting us before the big Other either as an *accomplice* or *witness* (occupying the place of the big Other itself gazing upon Alex). Alex's open implication of "viddy well" functions to create reflexive space void of safety, a destitute space where we must confront our self as the blind spot in our own visual field. To reiterate how we arrived at this destination, in Žižek's reading of Lacan he notes, that the gaze provides a pathway to examine the elementary skeleton of the fantasy structure—a process that will ultimately help to disentangle multiple facets of our own subjectivity and open unbearable reflexive pathways.

If I now look back to beginning of the film and consider Alex's recurring question, *what's it going to be then, eh?* I begin to understand I have always-already been Alex's accomplice. In the two years that I have been writing this text, however, I have found the majority of people with whom I have discussed this research are fundamentally unwilling to accept/acknowledge any part of themselves as having identified with Alex. I suppose this is not surprising given the nature of his crimes. But, returning to Žižek's analysis of the neighbor, I wonder what this unwillingness says about you and me? How have you and I experienced each other in relation to Alex? How has our understanding changed as we have navigated the path together? Have you imagined me as someone "like you"—the Imaginary other—with whom you engage in mirror-like relationships of competition, mutual recognition, and so on? Or, did this narrative read only as a theoretical analysis, an analysis of the rules that coordinate our co-

existence but lacking any spaces of mutual recognition? Was there a moment where you found yourself facing the Other qua the Real?

When we encounter the Other qua the Real, we experience the Other as some-thing with whom no symmetrical dialogue can be mediated by the symbolic Order.<sup>112</sup> This experience is a confrontation with the Other as an impossible object or “inhuman partner.” As intersubjective beings, this experience is further compounded by our phenomenological reading of the face. When we look at the face of another person itself, according to Žižek, we experience both a domestication and a gentrification. The other is inhuman, as monstrous, unfathomable abyss as well as the gentrified neighbor experienced in our face-to-face encounters. When we look at the face of an-other, we encounter both dimensions at once as a coincidence of opposites, where innocent vulnerability overlaps with pure evil. This overlap forces us to consider that these two dimensions are the same thing viewed from different perspectives—a manifestation of the parallax view.<sup>113</sup> What this means is that beneath my neighbor as my semblant—my mirror image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, a monstrous Thing that cannot be gentrified. And if this is true of my neighbor, it must also be true of me!

In Matt Flisfeder’s analysis of Žižek and Hitchcock, he discusses the function of perversion in film that complicates the way in which people might disavow the violence in *A Clockwork Orange*. Flisfeder’s analysis forces us to consider our self in relation to this violence and the monstrous Otherness that always lurks within the Real. According to Flisfeder, within the Hitchcockian film structure there exists a ‘will-to-enjoy’ that “forces the viewer to concede that he or she is possessed by the will to experience his or her own perverse violence on the screen—and then, by giving him or her exactly that which he or she desired, shows to the viewer

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<sup>112</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* (London: Verso, 2001) 163.

<sup>113</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

he or she has in fact been manipulated... as the true sadist.”<sup>114</sup> While *A Clockwork Orange* does not directly parallel the strategy of the Hitchcockian allegory, its complex presentation of violence within the narrative structure manipulates the spectator in a manner similar to what Flisfeder references in Hitchcock.

On the evening after the HOME-sequence, the Droogs embark on an expedition to a health farm where Alex murders a wealthy “Cat Lady” with her prized porcelain phallus (see Figure 4.19).



Figure 4.19: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

The moment of her attack is mediated by erotic paintings that the woman had displayed throughout her home. The post-murder sequence marks one of the few moments in the film that does not present violence from Alex’s point of view. As Alex attempts to flee from the Cat Lady’s farm, Kubrick cuts to a close up of a milk bottle, then reveals Dim holding it behind his back. Importantly, Dim had challenged Alex’s authority earlier that day, but Alex dispatched Dim with the same aggression he displays throughout the rest of the film. This time, however, Dim breaks the glass milk bottle across Alex’s face. The impact of the breaking bottle is shown in slow motion. As Alex collapses to the ground clutching at his face and crying, his Droogs laugh at him and run away—leaving Alex to be captured by police.

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<sup>114</sup> Matthew Flisfeder, *The Symbolic, the Sublime, and Slavoj Žižek’s Theory of Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 57.

Each time I have viewed this scene, I experienced his arrest as a subversion of my expectations. Admittedly, I initially omitted this final piece of analysis from this chapter because of my (un)conscious turmoil over this experience—and my expectations of how you would perceive me in the wake of my confession—“*it is not I who enjoys...*” While, on the surface, we might be able to identify with the disappointment of being betrayed by a friend, but (un)consciously I know Alex’s continued freedom would bring with it the continued enactment of his ultraviolent tendencies. This expression is the experience of the sadistic will-to-enjoy. In the moment things begin to go awry for Alex, it uncovers my (un)conscious disappointment, I will no longer get to experience his violence. The discomfort of knowing this desire is experienced as something transgressive because I am forced to acknowledge my desires as something that violates the norms of socially permissible behavior. In Alex we have observed the monstrous Thing that lurks in the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, but in this moment, we are forced to acknowledge: if this is true of Alex, it must also be true of me.

Critically, the inverse of this perspective is played out through Alex’s arrest as well. Even in police custody, we see that Alex remains cocksure and defiant. But Alex can no longer impress his will on the situation through acts of intimidation and violence, he has been rendered (relatively) passive like so many of his victims in the film. While in police custody, Alex is subjected to multiple outbursts of physical violence at the hands of the police (see Figure 4.19).



Figure 4.20: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

For many spectators, this is the start of Alex “getting what he deserves” for the acts he committed. I use this phrasing in quotes because in my discussions on this topic—both in non/academic and in/formal settings—this is the exact terminology used when my interlocutors are explicating their response. At a primordial level, what we are witnessing is the other side of the same perverse and violent coin. Unlike my own identification with Alex, viewers that identify with the desires of the police believe their desires are—for the most part—on the side of social norms. To repeat the preceding, what is transgressive about identifying with Alex is that it is experienced as something that violates the norms of socially permissible behavior. In this instance, while we might quibble over the specifics of the police’s tactics, Alex is ultimately viewed (by many) as getting his comeuppance. Therefore, many spectators feel free to invoke the “getting what he deserves” clause because it fulfills a kind of cosmic karma that will restore order to the Symbolic community. In the end, however, both sides uncover the inhuman monster that lurks within us. We learn the violence of *A Clockwork Orange* has always-already been inside of us.

Note: Rather than concluding this chapter here, chapter five functions as both a conclusion to this analysis and a conclusion to this research project as a whole. Because of its length and self-contained movement of reflexive analysis, I decided to create a subsequent chapter.

## CH 5- Tonight We are All Monster: Final Conclusion

I use the trauma of this final reflexive realization—of self as inhuman monster—as pathway toward concluding the entirety of this dissertation. In each of the preceding chapters I have examined various reflexive spaces and modes of analysis through the lens of Žižek’s negative ontology. Taken together, the cumulative impact of this analysis has uncovered a few key questions to consider as a terse framework for unthinking the reflective method:

1. How is the way we perceive a problem always-already the problem itself?
2. How does our understanding of self in relation to the world shift when we force ourselves to dwell in the spaces of our own misrecognition?
3. How do we see our own self-identity in relation to the o/Other?

Throughout this analysis, these questions allowed me to crack open—even if only for a moment—various reflexive spaces previously inaccessible to me by disrupting my previously held understandings of self as being in the world. When I arrived at the final moment of this reflexive analysis in chapter four, the realization that I had always been the inhuman monster, the Real of my self-identity seemed to represent (a) the ultimate violence of the human condition and (b) a certain hopelessness of the cause.

As a result of this, when I began the final framing of this chapter, I imagined my personal deadlock as providing the symmetrical context to refer back to the introductory chapter and Žižek’s invocation of the *courage of hopelessness*:

The true courage is not to imagine an alternative, but to accept the consequences of the fact that there is no clearly discernible alternative: the dream of an

alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice; it functions as a fetish that prevents us thinking through to the end the deadlock of our predicament. In short, the true courage is to admit that the light at the end of the tunnel is most likely the headlights of another train approaching us from the opposite direction.

The train approaching me, in this context, is my mirror image, the temporal confrontation that there is no big Other, there is no pathway out of my misrecognition. If the monster has always been lurking inside of me, but my understandings of reality have always been mediated and veiled by fantasy, then any articulation of a grand resistance against a non-existent big Other is the equivalent of hoping the train is “the light” even though I know it is a train. The horror of this space represents the realization that no matter how ardently I believe I am resisting the discourses of education as a teacher, what I have always missed is that I am the one maintaining those structures.

But as I dwelled on the failures of this research, I continually asked myself, *if everything you have encountered to this moment has been a misrecognition, then why do you believe this moment of understanding contains any certainty?* In response to this question, I began to reconsider this final scenario as both a conclusion to this research and a consideration of its application in the wake of what I have done. The questions I considered as a move forward centered on the notion of unthinking and whether an encounter with the Real truly opens the reflexive spaces to reconfigure our previously held notions of reality? It is from here that I began to consider whether the entirety of this project had been a failure? Had I still not pushed my understandings of self far enough to substantiate a disruptive change in my thinking? Or, when viewed from a shifted perspective, the method failed to enunciate a violence beyond the current coordinates of my subjective understanding.



In an attempt to articulate a horizon beyond this failure, this chapter contains an analysis of the actions of F. Alexander—the writer forced to watch the rape of his wife by Alex in the HOME-sequence—and consideration of whether his actions at the conclusion of the film exhibit the possibility of suspending the hold of the self and the Other in an act of authentic resistance. This final movement problematizes our understanding of self in relation to the o/Other, as Alexander represents both Alex’s foil and the only possibility of redemption in the film. Concurrently, Alexander allows us to complicate the paradoxical simultaneity of relationships that exist between teachers and students, rupturing our own memories of teaching and the silver screen depictions of teacher resistance that linger in our consciousness (i.e. *Stand and Deliver*, *Good Will Hunting*, or even *Dangerous Minds*). In the end, however, it appears we are forced into another position of virtual deadlock. If our revolutionary violence is shown to be something other than what we had believed in, how do we proceed? If we arrive at a reflexive space where there is no ‘feel good’ moment, how do we process the failures of our subjective position? By reflecting on Alexander’s narrative as a final questioning, I reflexively contemplate whether (a) the decimation of the subject position is an uncovering of our ultimate hopelessness or (b) despite our apparent hopelessness, does a space remain open to articulate something beyond our current deadlock?

### **F. Alexander: A Teacher’s Plea for Ethical Violence**

Let us recall the first time we encountered F. Alexander: he was bound and gagged on the floor, being assaulted by Alex and his Droogs, forced to watch the rape of his wife. It is Alexander’s horror, viewed through Alex’s eyes, that captures the terror of the HOME-sequence. We experience the horror and domination of Alex vis-a-via Alexander. While the

horror of sequence is transferred to us through Kubrick's use of the POV technique, the scene is largely felt through F. Alexander not his wife. This, of course, does mean that we do not identify with Mrs. Alexander or connect in a multitude of ways with her trauma, it is merely a commentary on Kubrick's use of filmic techniques to (re)present the scene. In this sequence, as we explored through the performance of *Singin' in the Rain*, Alex both attempts to destroy the object of Alexander's love and destroy the Symbolic representation of love for us as spectators. Thus, this analysis and our understanding of self has been intimately tied to Alexander—even if we were not consciously aware of it throughout the film.

After the visceral trauma of the HOME-sequence, we learn that Mrs. Alexander has died as a result of the incident which shifts Alexander's grief into a poignant rage against the government. It is within this shift that I will outline two final ways of thinking about ourselves (and self-identity) in relation to the Other that serves as a conclusion to the entirety of the research. First, by analyzing Alexander's actions from this moment forward, it is possible to reimagine the possibility and inherent failures of our interventions in teaching and education through a new prism. Next, when we arrive at Alexander's final act, we are able to re-consider our own final destination, a wondering (or unthinking) if what might be if we fully embrace the depth of the violence present on multiple temporal levels throughout the film.

Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's analysis of violence itself, the interconnectedness between F. Alexander and Alex at the end of the film problematizes the paradoxical simultaneity of relationships (domineering/nurturing) that exists between teachers and students. Broadly, Others are perceived, following Žižek, as an indifferent multitude whereby understanding acts as a violent gesture that cuts into this multitude and privileges the One—introducing a radical

imbalance into the whole.<sup>1</sup> Despite (or perhaps because of) the violence of the educational system, students are (often) privileged as the One by their teacher(s) and the intended violence of the reflexive method, for example, lacks the disruptive potentiality needed to transcend the subjective level of a teacher's understanding. For this reason, even if teachers methodologically articulate a radical vision of the reflexive method, when they return to the classroom, it is difficult for her/him to look beyond the face of the student before them (the One) and the relationship that exists as teacher and student (the Two). *A plea for ethical violence* is an invocation of resistance against the Two in the name of the Third, the faceless Others who are not present in our classrooms but are being subjected to the structural violence we seek to resist. Ethical violence is resistance in the name of the Third that "grounds justice in the dimension of universality proper."<sup>2</sup> Such a plea is not a call for literal violence in schools, at this moment in time, but an act that seeks difference in spite of the Other. In contrast to notions of understanding between the One (students) and the Two (teachers), our true resistance to the discourse of education qua ethical violence begins when we remember the faceless many left in the shadows.

From here we can imagine Alexander's political resistance as representing this faceless Third. While we do not learn about Alexander's political activity until late in the film, he blames the government and its tactics in response to the violence of society for his wife's death. Ultimately, Alexander becomes the leader of a political party that actively works to undermine the credibility of the ruling party in the government. The groups dissent against the government crescendos in the film over the prison system and the government's usage of the aversion therapy (the Ludovico technique) to stop violent criminals from committing future crimes. It is within this context that Alexander and Alex are brought back together—although their meeting appears

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "A Plea for Ethical Violence," *The Bible & Critical Theory*, 1, no 1 (2004), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "A Plea for Ethical Violence," *The Bible & Critical Theory*, 1, no 1 (2004), 1.

to be karmic happenstance, the narrative uncovers a complex array of spaces for us to re-locate ourselves.

### **The Second HOME-sequence**

One evening, a few years after the murder of his wife, F. Alexander opens the door of his HOME to an unrecognizable Alex—a scene that both functions to parallel and invert the first HOME-sequence. Alex, who has been beaten up by the police and left to die in the countryside, is again in need of assistance. Coinciding to his own empathy once more, Alexander lets Alex into his home. While tending to Alex, with the help of his own caregiver, Alexander recognizes Alex's picture from the morning paper and offers his sympathies for the violence Alex has experienced at the hands of the government and the police. This moment marks a critical point of reflection for us to consider how we think about our own interventions within the classroom. Recalling the notion of ethical violence as being identified as resistance beyond the Two in the name of Third, how many of us could imagine ourselves offering Alex similar refuge? Despite the violence of Alex's transgression (as the One) and the longitudinal harm it created (the Two), Alexander's concern remains rooted in his resistance of the government (the Third).

In this way, we can see begin to see how ethical violence is represented by a commitment to resistance as something beyond ourselves for a faceless other. This frame grounds resistance in the Third in the dimension of universality proper.<sup>3</sup> Resistance and our commonly held understandings of self qua students are thus structurally incompatible: resistance must disregard the privileged Other whom I “really understand.” This means that the Third beyond the Two is not secondary but always-already at the forefront, and the primary ethical obligation is toward

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<sup>3</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).

this Third not the Other whom I face. The difficulty we experience as teachers, of course, is coming to terms with looking beyond the students' faces that look back at us (the Two)—as Alexander looks beyond Alex—or (un)consciously considering the consequences of any act on our position as a teacher (the One). Ultimately, what Alexander's final interaction unnervingly exemplifies is that what unites the subject and the Other in the Third is the violence of resistance itself—even if this involves the decimation of the subject's own personal desires or previously held understandings of self-identify.

Upon hearing Alex's story, particularly how he underwent the government's aversion therapy program (the Ludovico Technique), Alexander urges Alex to share his story publicly. He wants Alex to join him in his resistance against the government believing Alex will serve as a fulcrum to sway public opinion and dislodge the current majority political party. Alexander's position here reminded me of the complex array of experiences I encountered in my analysis of self in chapter three. Ultimately, my reflexive analysis exposed that my students merely served as a "prop" for enacting my subjective fantasies as the teacher. The primary impetus behind my "radical" teaching practices was never true critical resistance (developing students' consciousness or a liberatory critique of the system that subjugates them) but the fulfillment of a fundamental narcissism, a pedagogical stance that realized my political desire to be a "radical," and the creation of a big Other to be resisted by radical teachers like me. As Alexander begins to see the potentiality of Alex as a symbolic object, do his actions remain ethically rooted in the Third or does Alex function as a similar prop? In both instances—my own teaching and Alexander's use of Alex—if the larger outcome is achieved, does are fallibility as subjective beings matter? If, for example, my students have become more critically conscious and better prepared to resist the systems that subjugate them, does my uncovering of unconscious

motivations matter? Or, does the act remain an act of ethical violence, regardless of intent? Similarly, if Alexander's motives remain rooted in resistance of the government for the people, do his considerations of Alex change the ethical propositions of the violence of the act? If the entirety of this reflexive analysis is foundationally rooted in the One, can it simultaneously function as an act of ethical violence if both you and I discover a traumatic kernel of our being that allows us to act in ways previously unimaginable that are rooted in a faceless other?

After asking Alex to join their cause, Alexander shares with Alex that since his wife died, he has had difficulty doing chores around the house himself (explaining the necessity of the caregiver). When Alex enquires about Alexander's wife, he goes into great detail about her rape and murder. Because of Alex's aversion therapy, he becomes sickened by the details and Alexander orders Alex to rest for the evening. In this moment, we realize as spectators of the scene, that Alex has now become aware that he is the perpetrator of the crime, but Alexander is unaware that Alex is the young man who raped and murdered his wife. Shit! In a similar form to what we observed in chapter one, it is precisely when we think we are gaining a proper grasp on our condition (or reality) that we are most blinded by our position. Certainly, Alexander's failure to identify Alex could represent the psychological repression of an unimaginable trauma, but is it not reminiscent of our unwillingness to see what is often right before our eyes? Like Frank's unwillingness put on the sunglasses offered to him by Nada, we do not want to encounter the trauma and alienation of what appears right before us. The answers are always there, just out of our reach, we merely lack the perspective to locate them.

Later in the evening, as Alex sits in a warm bath, we observe Alexander making calls to his comrades informing them that he has a potent weapon to use against the government.



Figure 5.1: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

As Alex becomes increasingly more relaxed, a washcloth draped over his face and arms dangling over the side of the tube, he begins singing *Sing' in the Rain*. Beginning as a soft murmur and then growing in joyous intensity, the song slowly becomes audible to Alexander. It takes him a moment to register the melody before the expression on his face enunciates the unequivocal understanding of the interconnectedness between he and Alex. But despite this realization, Alexander does not let on to Alex that he knows. From this point, Alex now represents both a weapon to leverage against the government and the One against which Alexander is compelled to exact his revenge. Not dissimilarly, as I continually reevaluate my failures as a critical educator, I began to consider how all Three levels of relationships might exist at once and whether the act can remain a violent intervention against the discursive/Symbolic structure.

### *The One*

Me: My students serve as a prop to enact my fantasies of teaching AND I do care whether they are actively learning.

Alexander: Alex serves as a prop to enact his fantasies about political resistance AND an object to act out against to avenge his wife's death.

### *The Two*

Me: Through the process of teaching, my students and I share an intimate interconnectedness.

Alexander: Because of Alex's past transgressions, he and Alexander are intimately linked.

### *The Third*

Me: The resistance of oppressive ideas and ideologies that are enacted through thinking itself.

Alexander: The resistance of the government as a controlling apparatus.

Ultimately, if we arrive at our final destination, does it matter how we arrived? If we are unable to disconnect from the One and the Two, does the act remain violent but lack the true ethics of a movement rooted in the Third?

After Realizing Alex's true identity, Alexander and his political conspirators drug Alex and lock him in an upstairs bedroom. Using the trigger from his aversion therapy—Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony—the group tortures Alex through the use of sound.



Figure 5.2: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

The political aim of the group remains intact as they hope to show the danger of state's aversion therapy technique by driving Alex into madness. But, as Alex writhes in pain on the floor, we simultaneously see a look of joy wash over Alexander's face.



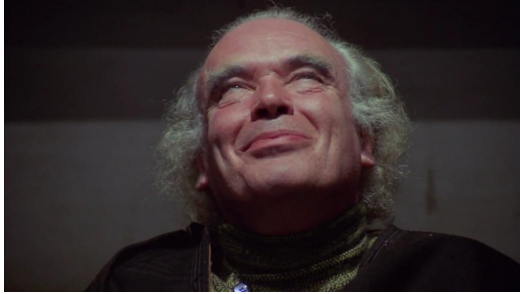


Figure 5.3: Scene from *A Clockwork Orange*, Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Los Angeles, Warner Bros., 1972.

Alexander is experiencing the joy in violence we once saw only through the eyes of Alex. On one level, we now encounter the inversion of our reflection at the conclusion of chapter four. Do we experience sympathy for Alex in this moment despite what we know of his past or does this moment represent another instance of his getting what he deserves because Alexander's revenge is restoring a kind of karmic balance to the world? Would many of us even go as far as to identify his actions as "technically" wrong but a socially permissible behavior because we understand how he arrived at this point or could even imagine ourselves acting out a similar fantasy? At the temporal level, does Alexander's joyous face simply represent the monster that lurks within all of us?

As we have encountered through this research, the difficulty we encounter when tarrying with the negative is not that we should avoid such feeling but fully embrace the monsters that lurk within us. The subject that emerges through these processes of reflection and wounding is the subject of the night of the world, or the subject as lack itself that emerges when we embrace that piece of ourselves that we might prefer not to exist. In a like manner, when I recognize myself as a pathological stain or as not existing in my reflection in the mirror, the confrontation with ontological finitude forces me consider how, for example, all educative experiences might seize

within the vortices, gaps, and voids in the fabric of reality. This is the realization of the Hegelian ‘night of the world:’

The human being is the night, the empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of representations and images, of which none belong to him. It is this Night, Nature's interior, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical imagery, where it is night everywhere . . . where, here, shoots a bloody head and, there, suddenly, another white shape—only to disappear all the same. We see this Night whenever we look into another's eye—into a night that becomes utterly terrifying—wherein, truly, we find the Night of the World suspended.<sup>4</sup>

Following this formulation, what we experience in Alexander's joy is the fantasmatic phenomenon of “seeing one's self seeing”—whether through the horror of Alex or the joy of Alexander—it is an ontogenetic experience that collapses the fantasy frame into the abyss of radical negativity at the heart of the subject. This is a return to the zero-level of our subjective understanding, the moment we see the weight of the violence and joy present of *A Clockwork Orange*.

In the final scene of the second HOME-sequence, Alex can no longer withstand the pain of his torture and attempts suicide by jumping out of a second-floor window. Even as Alexander exacts his revenge and forfeits his own morality, is it possible to interpret his actions as suspending the face for the Third? Can we view the violence of Alex's attempted suicide as remaining grounded in resistance and the dimension of universality proper through a continued desire to overturn the state's sanctioned use of the Ludovico technique—the program Alexander

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<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 353.

had fought against since his wife's death? If what unities the subject and Other in ethical violence is ultimately resistance itself, then even if the act involves the decimation of the subject's own position, does it remain ethical—or at least transgressive? Although Alexander's final act appears to signal the ultimately deadlock of the subject position, have we arrived at another position of failure within the reflexive method?

For much of this analysis, I have imagined this moment as again returning me to the introduction and the ultimate hopelessness of the cause. But the lesson that Žižek never stops repeating is that there is no big Other nor is there an Other of the Other which could provide a guarantee of any our existence. In the absence of an Other, the gaze does not provide us with any real meaning. Instead, our encounters with the gaze threaten to break the hold of the Symbolic and return us to an impossible truth of the Real—which is a rupture, cut, or wound in our understanding of reality. This rupture, however, is not between something and something different—or a self-identity that was at the beginning and what comes after—but rather the introduction of pure difference itself. This is the reflexive realization that at the beginning, *there was nothing*. This moment of nothingness is everything. It is the active nothingness described by Hegel in the night of the world. What we see in the gaze of F. Alexander is our own descent into the dark of the night, a night that becomes utterly terrifying.

When we continually tarry with the focus of our ontological understanding, it becomes possible to imagine how even the most immense structures can be rendered incomprehensible. We begin to realize that outside of the reference to meaning we ascribe to an object –the massiveness we perceive in all objects does not pertain to any direct materiality. Even the language with which we describe and interpret our world, as Wittgenstein notes, is endlessly fallible: “Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way

about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about.”<sup>5</sup> Instead of imaging our ontological negativity as utter hopelessness, how can we consider the dissolution of the social edifice a movement toward what Alenka Zupančič terms an ethics of the real? The ethical act, Zupančič argues, cannot look for guarantees. Rather, it must define ethics itself. Ethics, according to Zupančič, cannot define what is ethical because what is ethical is what breaks and remakes the parameters of ethics.<sup>6</sup> Such an ethics is imagined as the final degradation of the educational apparatus, a radical pedagogy that opens the possibility of enunciating the lack of the big Other through a shared understanding of alienation within all facets of education. As such, deadlock is not hopelessness and the ethical is not only an act of resistance but beyond resistance: it redefines the parameters of what is and is not an act of education. Similarly, it does not presuppose any notion of the good but determines what is good. The ethical act, as such, cannot simply disobey, or break, the rule; rather, it must change the rules and redefine the nature of education itself—by changing the parameters of what is possible. The ethical act is a return to Leninist politics: a revolutionary act not authorized by a fantasmatic big Other but by the subject him/herself - *ne s'autorise que de lui-même*.

### **A Violent Love**

What we see of ourselves in the eyes of Alexander is that there is no short cut here and there is no guarantee of a successful outcome either. Instead, it is a universal recognition that we are all in the same shit. No matter how ideological committed I am to a cause, will that commitment ever outweigh the love I see in the face of my wife or my students? Using Žižek's defense of Paulian Christianity, I truly arrive back at the beginning, and question why. In Žižek's

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<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).

<sup>6</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000).

dialectical materialist reading of Christianity, he establishes the foundation for the revolutionary act by extolling violence as a work of love through a Che-ification of Christ. Beginning with the famous lines from Che Guevara's diary: "Let me say, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by a strong feeling of love. It is impossible to think of an authentic revolutionary without this quality."

Citing several passages from the Bible (Matthew 10:34-9; Luke 12:49-53), Žižek's outlines how Christian love is an inherently violent passion and it is through this love that we are able to introduce radical difference into the Symbolic, to privilege the object of love at the expense of some other.<sup>7</sup> Žižek argues that Christian love as *agape* is a form of political love that allows the subject to "unplug from the organic community into which [they] were born."<sup>8</sup> Agape thereby enjoins all people to love the excluded Other in all her Otherness. The capacity for violence and cruelty is, in fact, what gives love its power. "Love without cruelty is powerless," according to Žižek, and "cruelty without love is blind" It is, in fact, its link with violence which enables love to transcend the natural limitations of man. This is what Žižek calls love in the fullest "Paulinian" sense: "the domain of pure violence, the domain outside law (Symbolic), the domain of violence which is neither law-founding nor law-sustaining, is the domain of love."<sup>9</sup>

This Paulinian love is, for Žižek, how we must interpret revolutionary violence even as it reaches its outer limits. To this end, Che's statement that "the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love" cannot be disassociated from his more problematic statement on revolutionaries as "killing machines:"

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<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010) 99.

<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010) 107.

<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. Big Ideas/Small Books. 1st Picador ed. New York: Picador, 2008) 196.

Hatred is an element of the struggle; a relentless hatred of the enemy, compelling us over and beyond the natural limitations that man is heir to and transforming him into an effective, violent, selective and cold killing machine. Our soldiers must be thus; a people without hatred cannot vanquish a brutal enemy.<sup>10</sup>

According to Žižek, Christ is similarly cited at multiple points throughout Bible making overlapping comments: “if anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). What both Christ and Che exhibit is an agape love, “an unconditional equalitarian love for the Neighbor”<sup>11</sup> which necessitates an absolute commitment to the cause—even when we are forced into violent resistance. This movement is a passionate attempt to “introduce a Difference, a gap in the order of being, to privilege and elevate some object at the expense of others.” Such violence is already evident in the form of a love “which tears its object out of context, elevating it to the Thing.”<sup>12</sup> This elevation involves the violence of the teacher ripping themselves free of the system, of rupturing old relationships, opting for a different future, and the destruction of all aspects of our self-identity that we hold dear. The violence we should seek must begin with a striking out against ourselves, a will to force ourselves to pay the price for our transgressions. This violence untethers our thinking from all previous modes of knowing. It is a reflexive gesture through which the space opens for people to not only “realize their old emancipatory dreams... [but] reinvent their very modes of dreaming.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002) 174.

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010) 117.

<sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010) 32-33.

<sup>13</sup> Mao Zedong and Slavoj Žižek, *On Practice and Contradiction* (London: Verso, 2007) 24.